CHARLES DICKENS
THE APOSTLE OF THE PEOPLE

Edwin Pugh

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BY

EDWIN PUGH

LONDON

THE NEW AGE PRESS

140 FLEET STREET, E.C.

1908

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PREFATORY

CHARLES DICKENS, beyond question or cavil the most popular of all English novelists, was born at Landport in Portsea, on Friday, 7th February, 1812.

Twenty-three years later, in 1835, Robert Owen founded his Association of All Classes of All Nations, and the sacred cause of Socialism got itself a name for the first time in its long and splendid history. Until then the word had not been coined, though the creed itself, in certain of its aspects, was of course as old as human nature.

Charles Dickens died on Thursday, 9th June, 1870.

It was not until thirteen years afterwards, in 1883, that Socialism can truly be said to have begun to lay a really firm hold on the mind and heart of the English people.

And these very significant dates are set forth on the threshold of this enterprise thus nakedly and baldly, and yet with so much pomp and circumstance, because the present writer feels them to be so vitally essential to his purpose in projecting this book that it would be impossible for him to exaggerate their importance. Indeed, the whole superstructure of his case is built four-square, and stands or falls on the foundation of just these dates.

PART I

THE ANTERIOR TIME

CHARLES DICKENS: The Apostle of the People.

CHAPTER I

SOME EARLY OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

I

THE passing of the eighteenth century, and the opening of the nineteenth, found the whole of the Western Hemisphere virtually in a state of heavy travail.

America, having lately secured her independence, was busying herself in forming and consolidating her new Constitution; and in resolving her jarring and warring elements into one united nation—a task upon which she is still engaged.

The horrors of the first outbreak of the French Revolution and the ensuing Reign of Terror had convulsed France to the core of her being, had debilitated her very nerve-centres, and had now left her supine and gasping in the throes of a new paroxysm. The figure of Napoleon, dim and shadowy and indistinct as yet, was nevertheless beginning to bulk ever larger and more menacing on the horizon. Already, in Northern Italy, he had inaugurated a fresh era in the wars of the young and grim republic. His desperate triumph at Arcola, in that fierce long-drawn-out campaign against the aggressive supremacy of Austria in

Southern Europe, had not only raised his passionate, insatiate ambition to the explosive point, but had also confirmed his superstitious nature in the belief that he was destined of God to become the Emperor of the World. The immediately following Treaty of Peace, signed at Campo-Formio, whilst it seemed to strengthen the hands of the Directory of Paris and perhaps actually did so for the time being, also marked the first step toward that iron-handed military despotism, so beloved of the great Corsican adventurer, which was to raise him on the shoulders of his hapless soldiery, in a hideous reeking haze of blood and smoke, to supreme power at last . . . and finally to hurl him headlong to irrevocable defeat and destruction on the plains of Waterloo.

It was an era of strange and bizarre and piquant contrasts, of most pregnant changes, most momentous happenings, and bewildering eventualities.

There, in France, out of Sansculottism and the Feast of Pikes, had risen an oligarchy, at the head of which the little Corporal had precariously established himself over a confederation of princes, among whom members of his own family occupied insecure and thorny thrones. He had created a new order of nobility, had done his determined best to revive the departed splendours of the ancient French Courts, squandering the public money and mortgaging the national credit for the benefit of his tools and partisans, intriguing tortuously with the legitimate reigning families of Europe to the pitiful end which he subsequently attained by his marriage with the Archduchess Maria Louisa of Austria.

And here, in England, the long reign of George the Third was drawing to its close in a welter of all manner of conflicting elements. The King on his throne was reduced to a doddering figure of folly. The Prince Regent, in whom the kingship was virtually vested, had never in any sense commanded the respect of the mass of

his subjects, or even made any very strong sentimental appeal either to their loyalty, their affection, or their pride. The aristocracy hated him. His familiars despised him. And the vast bulk of the common people winked the other eye, so to speak, and rolled their heads waggishly in a lickerish transport at the bare mention of his august name. He was equally a failure and a byword as a sovereign, as a man, and as a gentleman. His clumsy attempts to emulate the gay profligate spirit that had lent a meretricious glory of cheap gilt to the period of the Restoration had collapsed upon utter banality and buffoonery where it had not resulted in worse evils—in orgies of senseless lust and wild debauchery, in squalid viciousness and brutal violence. And when at last this sorry self-styled First Gentleman of Europe did come to the throne he immediately proceeded to alienate himself still further from the sympathies of his subjects by his scandalous treatment of his queen, Caroline; his silly cynical recantation of the Whiggish opinions he had so loudly and intemperately expressed as Prince of Wales—merely, it is said, to annoy his royal father; as well as by his contemptuous handing over of the affairs of the country to the autocratic dominance of such a succession of unpopular Tory premiers as Spencer Perceval, Lord Liverpool, Canning, Viscount Gooderich, and the Duke of Wellington; and finally, to crown all, by his precipitation of the dastardly massacre of Peterloo, which was primarily caused by his stiff-necked opposition to the emancipation of the Roman Catholics.

Charles Dickens was eighteen years old when George the Fourth died. Thus it will be seen that the most formative years of his youth were spent mainly during the reign of one of the most unsatisfactory and despicable of British monarchs, and partly during the brief period of William the Fourth's sly and furtive rule which immediately followed.

It was a time of considerable internal stress, and had he been the veriest dolt he could hardly have escaped coming under the sway of the various tremendous influences of such bitter and virulent agitations as those which raged, between the time of his birth and his twenty-fourth year, over such vexed questions, among others, as the repeal of the corn laws and the reformation of Parliament. Indeed, we know that he lived for several years in an atmosphere of heated political controversy, and, moreover, had his own small spectacular part to play in the very thick of these dissensions. He was just nineteen when, in 1831, he entered the Gallery of the House of Commons as a reporter on the brilliant but evanescent *True Sun*, and during several sessions it will presently be made demonstrably certain that in his journalistic capacity he had to follow very closely and minutely the course of many hardly-fought debates: such debates, for instance, as those which preceded the passing of great and epoch-marking Liberal measures like the First Reform Act of 1832, the Act for the Abolition of Colonial Slavery of 1833, the Act of 1834 for the Reform of the Poor Laws, and the Municipal Reform Act of 1835. All these bills, in turn, were strenuously opposed and obstinately obstructed by the various dispossessed members of that high and dry old gang of Tory statesmen whom George the Fourth had basely encouraged and abetted by every underhand means in his power, and who now had the support of their present King, William the Fourth, at their back—an unseen secret force of hardly calculable strength, engineering their counsels and driving them again and again into renewed action, or, rather, reaction.

Indubitably, there must have been some extremely exciting scenes on the floor of the House, and elsewhere, during those crowded and eventful years, and there is little doubt that Charles Dickens was not only a witness but a recorder of most of them. To such an ardent,

sanguine temperament as his they must have afforded a rare deal of stimulating food for reflection and criticism. And that he was of a surety infected by the prevalent spirit of unrest and dissatisfaction which rent and tore the country into tatters of faction, and that, furthermore, he was eager to throw himself into the universal struggle for better conditions, is plain from the fact that on the occasion of a general strike of parliamentary reporters he appeared as their popularly elected representative and spokesman ; and, it is said, conducted their case with so much skill and address that he was successful in winning a full recognition of the justice of their demands, and in negotiating a satisfactory settlement of their grievances.

II

But later on, as a member of the staff of the *Mirror of Parliament* and as a reporter attached to the *Morning Chronicle*, he began still further to enlarge his experiences, not only of the inner rough-and-tumble of political life, but in other far wider and more spacious fields of activity.

The following passages are taken from Forster's *Life*. (And it may be as well to explain, here and now, that except where it is otherwise explicitly stated, all extracts quoted at any length are derived from that source.)

" His career in the Gallery, and the engagements connected with it . . . that this occupation was of the utmost importance in its influence on his life, in the discipline of his powers as well as of his character, there can be no doubt whatever. ' To the wholesome training of severe newspaper work when I was a very young man I constantly refer my first successes,' he said to the New York editors when he last took leave of them."

But no doubt he owed more than that to these particular experiences—more, conceivably, than he ever realized.

To that period of his probation, when he sat up aloft and studied at his leisure the working of the creaky patched-up political machinery, he owed his healthy disillusionment in regard to the ultimate possibilities of legislative action, as legislation was and is still carried on under the foolish party system. He owed to it his robust contempt for the wire-pulling methods, the chicanery and double-dealing, the time-serving and tuft-hunting and self-seeking, which then, as now, degrade the whole business of Lords and Commons, the Ins and the Outs. Still it had lessons for him apart from these —to a youth—rather bitter ones, hardly less important, perhaps, in their effects on his final development.

"It opened to him a wide and varied range of experience, which his wonderful observation, exact as it was humorous, made entirely his own. He saw the last of the old coaching-days and of the old inns that were a part of them; but it will be long before the readers of his living page see the last of the life of either. 'There never was,' he once wrote, '. . . anybody connected with newspapers, who in the same space of time had so much express and post-chaise experiences as I. And what gentlemen they were to serve in such things at the old *Morning Chronicle!* Great or small, it did not matter. I have had to charge for half a dozen break-downs in half a dozen times as many miles. I have had to charge for the damage of a great-coat from the drippings of a blazing wax-candle, in writing through the smallest hours of the night in a swiftly-flying carriage and pair. I have had to charge for all sorts of breakages fifty times in a journey, without question, such being the ordinary results of the pace which we went at. I have charged for broken hats, broken luggage, broken chaises, broken harness—everything but

a broken head, which is the only thing they would have grumbled to pay for.' "

All this, and what follows, is quoted as evidence in support of the present writer's claim that Dickens pursued the calling of a reporter of political speeches with such whole-hearted thoroughness and painstaking conscientiousness as to leave no doubt of his full acquaintance with the political thought and the political utterances of that time, and is therefore in no sense irrelevant to the purpose of this book.

Something to the same effect as the foregoing he repeated publicly, in May, 1865, on the occasion of his presiding at the second annual dinner of the Newspaper Press Fund, when he condensed within the compass of his speech a summary of the whole of his reporting life.

" 'I am not here,' he said, 'advocating the case of a mere ordinary client of whom I have little or no knowledge. I hold a brief to-night for my brothers. I went into the Gallery of the House of Commons as a Parliamentary reporter when I was a boy, and I left it—I can hardly believe the inexorable truth—nigh thirty years ago. I have pursued the calling of a reporter under circumstances of which many of my brethren here can form no adequate conception. I have often transcribed for the printer, from my shorthand notes, important public speeches in which the strictest accuracy was required, and a mistake in which would have been, to a young man, severely compromising, writing on the palm of my hand by the light of a dark lantern in a postchaise and four, galloping through a wild country, and through the dead of the night, at the then surprising rate of fifteen miles an hour.' "

And pausing here to concede that it is barely possible that even such exceptional attendant circumstances as these might after all fail to impress the words of a particular speech on the memory of a mere mechanical drudge, it is not possible that they should altogether

have escaped from a memory so unusually retentive and exact as that of Dickens.

" ' The very last time I was at Exeter,' he continued, ' I strolled into the castle-yard there to identify, for the amusement of a friend, the spot on which I once " took," as we used to call it, an election speech of Lord John Russell at the Devon contest, in the midst of a lively fight ' "—here is circumstantiality of detail!— " ' maintained by all the vagabonds in that division of the county, and under such a pelting rain that I remember two good-natured colleagues, who chanced to be at leisure, held a pocket-handkerchief over my note-book, after the manner of a state canopy in an ecclesiastical procession. I have worn my knees by writing on them in the old back-row of the old gallery of the old House of Commons ; and I have worn my feet by standing to write in a preposterous pen in the old House of Lords, where we used to be huddled together like so many sheep—kept in waiting, say, until the woolsack might want restuffing. Returning home from exciting political meetings in the country to the waiting Press in London, I do verily believe I have been upset in almost every description of vehicle known in this country. I have been, in my time, belated on miry by-roads, towards the small hours, forty or fifty miles from London, in a wheelless carriage with exhausted horses and drunken postboys, and have got back in time for publication. . . .' "

And so on. Now it cannot, I think, be questioned that such experiences as these must infallibly have left an indelible mark on the mind of such an impressionable young man as Dickens, serving as nothing else could have done to connect up the links of memory into one strong unbroken chain and conducing to that warm interest in all political and social matters which it will be shown Dickens evinced in after-life.

Then there is the independent testimony of James

Grant, who was himself in the gallery with Dickens, and who states that "among its eighty or ninety reporters he occupied the very highest rank . . . for accuracy in reporting." And accuracy in reporting (as the present writer himself can vouch) is not to be attained in any perfection by dint of mere verbal dexterity, but in itself argues a certain comprehensive knowledge of the matter reported upon.

Again, there is the testimony of Vincent Dowling, for many years editor of the famous *Bell's Life*, to whom Dickens writes "on a Tuesday morning in May, 1835, from Bristol"; the occasion that has taken him to the West, connected with a reporting party, being Lord John Russell's Devonshire contest above named. . . . "He expects to forward 'the conclusion of Russell's dinner' by Cooper's Company's coach leaving The Bush at half-past six next morning; and by the first Ball's coach on Thursday morning he will forward the report of the Bath dinner." His colleague is to go over to Bath next morning. "He is himself to come back by the mail from Marlborough; he has no doubt, if Lord John makes a speech of any ordinary dimensions, it can be done by the time Marlborough is reached."

Here is further proof, if any more be needed, of his prodigious labours along these lines, all going to show how intimately he was in touch with the political activities of that time. And lastly—not to labour the point unduly—may be cited that anecdote of his reporting days which tells how the Earl of Derby, when Mr. Stanley, had "on one important occasion made a speech which all the reporters found it necessary greatly to abridge; that its essential points had nevertheless been so well given in the *Chronicle*"—as only a reporter who was himself something of a politician could have given them, in fact—"that Mr. Stanley, having need of it for himself in greater detail, had sent a request to the reporter to meet him in Carlton House Terrace and take down

the entire speech; that Dickens attended and did the work accordingly, much to Mr. Stanley's satisfaction; and that, on his dining with Mr. Gladstone, a month or two before he died, and finding the aspect of the dining-room strangely familiar, he discovered afterwards on inquiry that it was there he had taken the speech."

III

But, first, as regards the French Revolution.

The motto—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity—was about as good a battle-cry as any army of oppressed people going into action against the forces of merciless tyranny and unrighteous privilege could hope to raise. It was one to appeal to friends of freedom all the world over. Moreover, the avowed objects for which the people fought were unassailably just and right. The scandal of that foul régime, which touched its nadir of shame under the sovereignty of Louis XV—Louis the Well-Beloved!—had stunk in the nostrils of even the most corrupt Courts of Europe for the greater part, at least, of the fifty-nine years of his nominal reign. His death and the accession of Louis XVI as a mere lad of twenty had come only just in the nick of time to save the rotten French Government from immediate overthrow. But even so, the signal for its doom had been given, and its appointed hour could only be postponed a few years longer. The fiscal acrobatics of the cynical Calonne, who sought to quench the fires of universal discontent with oil, and who "while the world held out its hands, held out his hat"; the darkly mysterious affair of the Diamond Necklace, so tragically compromising to the fair fame of the innocent Queen Marie Antoinette, for whom the people had still retained some feelings of sentiment; the heartless, barbarous gibes of innumerable, unspeakable human echoes of that grin-

ning Foulon, who bade the starving rabble eat grass, and who himself ate of the same with his hoary old head on a pike ; and side by side with all these blatant and whispered iniquities and infamies the ever-increasing misery and degradation of the mass of the French people : these things, working together in a simmering stew of agonized revolt against intolerable conditions, at last had burst off the lid of apathy and despair which hitherto had covered its unsightliness in, and at the promise of one small initial advantage to be somehow gained by means of a new Parliamentary dispensation, had suddenly overflowed and fired the hearts of the poor—who were the Nation, indeed !—and kindled them to a new glory of hope that was soon to blaze up into such a pillar of fire as only seas of blood could quench.

Behold the same on that bleak January day which was to mark the first stage of the people's emancipation.

" How the whole People shakes itself, as if it had one life ; and, in thousand-voiced rumour, announces that it is awake, suddenly out of a long death-sleep, and will thenceforth sleep no more ! The long looked-for has come at last ; wondrous news of Victory, Deliverance, Enfranchisement, sounds magical through every heart. To the proud strong man it has come, whose strong hands shall no more be gyved ; to whom boundless unconquered continents lie disclosed. The weary day-drudge has heard of it ; the beggar with his crust moistened in tears. What ! To us also has hope reached ; down even to us ? Hunger and hardship are not to be eternal ? The bread we extorted from the rugged glebe, and, with the toil of our sinews, reaped and ground, and kneaded into loaves, was not wholly for another, then ; but we also shall eat of it and be filled ? "

There is a picture of the haggard, hungering people ;

and it was all that they asked: To Be Fed. No; to be allowed to feed themselves. But again and again were their demands—almost absurd in their pathetic, meek reasonableness—denied. Again and again were they forced, wantonly and perversely and wickedly, to taste the pangs of hope deferred which maketh the heart sick. Again and again were their aching longings for some small measure of justice, even for some slight recognition of their claims, gainsaid and baulked and thwarted. Promises and cajoleries, cajoleries and promises! . . . until, the limits of their patience being exceeded at long last, maddened, tortured, cheated, derided, they arose in their blind, insensate fury against their mocking oppressors, leaped at their throats and dragged them down and worried them, with ensanguined jaws, as a dog worries its dead prey. That was the People's fault, which is still remembered against them. But the provocation that stood as the justification of their rage and cruelty, that excuses the worst of their excesses, is forgotten or disregarded.

For the fact stands that the truth concerning the causes of the French Revolution are even yet only emerging slowly from the thick clouds of misrepresentation and misunderstanding in which they began to be shrouded before the *First Year of the Republic* was officially announced: clouds that ascended unto heaven out of the smoke and dust of the Reign of Terror, and are not entirely dissipated to this day. Consider how, at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, popular opinion regards the names of some of the best-known leaders of the Revolution: such men as Marat and Robespierre. There is a grotesque chamber of horrors reserved for these patriots in the hearts of the vast majority of the British people which finds its apt and concrete expression at the waxworks show in the Marylebone Road. One would imagine, if one did not know better than to heed current historical

verdicts, that Marat and Robespierre were little removed from homicidal maniacs.

Carlyle himself, by every trick of melodrama in his bag, aided and promulgated and embroidered these misconceptions; which, however, he did not of course originate, but had only been brought up to believe in, and so did believe in them, like the good filial Scot that he was.

See how he delights to hold up Robespierre to derision and contumely! He is always "the sea-green Incorruptible—most consistent, incorruptible of thin, acrid men"—to Carlyle. And there is ever on tap a dose of the same fierce, rather clumsy raillery for the figure of Marat also: Marat, who must always be derided by Carlyle as "the horse-leech: a moon-struck, much-enduring individual . . . one squalidest, bleared mortal, redolent of soot and horse-dung . . . Renovator of Human Science, Lecturer on Optics . . . remarkable Horse Leech, as thy bleared soul looks forth, through thy bleared, dull-acrid, woe-stricken face, what sees it in all this? Any faintest light of hope, like dayspring after Nova Zembla night? Or is it but blue sulphur light, and spectres, woe, suspicion, revenge without end?" But Charlotte Corday, who killed him, she is of "stately Norman figure, of a beautiful still countenance . . . cruel-lovely, with half-angelic, half-demonic splendour; to gleam for a moment, and in a moment be extinguished: to be held in memory, so sweet complete was she, through long centuries! . . ." Confronted with her, Marat "croaks," "clutches" his tablets, writes "with bare, shrunk arms," and then, as the knife of the fanatical maiden pierces his heart, his life "with a groan gushes out, indignant, to the shades below!"

And that was precisely how the majority of people in England looked at these events for fifty years and more after their occurrence.

But the verdict of that time, as of to-day, was and is in direct opposition to the verdict of Marat's contemporaries. The news of his assassination was received by the masses with a wail of bitterest regret and sorrow, of sincere and profound grief. It was he, and not the fair, devoted girl, whom the common people elected to hail as a hero and a martyr. It was the poor whose blood and tears had gone to enrich the soil and prepare it for the revolutionary harvest who mourned in him the friend and champion who had shed a first bright light of hope upon their dreary path and opened up for them their first prospect of liberty. Many young men of that day changed their proper names for the name of the beloved dead demagogue; among them, Murat, who afterwards occupied a throne under Napoleon. And Robespierre was equally a favourite with the common people, who, it is no exaggeration to say, adored him as their saviour, and after his death at the instigation of treacherous false friends and jealous rivals, went far to canonise his memory. To their intimates, to those whose cause they had espoused, to their personal friends, and—best proof of all—to the members of their respective families, these two men (among others like them), whose names have been held in public abhorrence for a hundred years since, were inexpressibly dear. They were not merely popular. Their success was not one of mere salvation, or of admiration, or even respect. They were regarded with the deepest affection by all who knew them best.

But these and other similar authentic circumstances connected with the French Revolution, its leaders, its causes, and its aims are facts only just beginning to be made manifest. Charles Dickens, along with millions of his countrymen, was not only born, but died in utter and total ignorance of them; in worse than ignorance, because he shared the delusions of his contemporaries. Later on, when we come to con over *A Tale of Two*

Cities together, it will be shown from what points of view he regarded the French Revolution in all its various phases and aspects as he knew them. For the present it is enough to insist on this :—

That the mighty social phenomena of that terrific upheaval and the distorted construction put upon them for seventy or eighty years at least had their inevitable effect—hardly calculable, indefinite, but indisputable—upon Charles Dickens, as they have had effect upon every other being who has ever given consideration to them since. Indeed, in the light of what has since been thought and uttered and written upon the subject of that amazing epoch, I am inclined to think that the French Revolution was one of the worst things that has ever happened to the cause of Socialism. But it might have been one of the best . . . if its lessons had been taken to heart instead of its horrors ; if the fair side of the people's will had been allowed its full weight in the balances against the foul side of the people's passions—passions engendered of generations of intolerable cruelty and oppression ; or if only Mirabeau had lived. As it is—*pace* Dickens—the French Revolution remained, for nearly a century after it took place, perhaps the one example in history most readily quotable by opponents of progress against the democratic movement. Even to-day it is no uncommon thing to be asked, in the course of desultory discussion : What about the French proletariat when they got into power ?

Herein, then, is the reason why the present writer has, maybe a little inexplicably to the reader up to now, ventured to deal at some slight length with this subject.

CHAPTER II

OTHER INFLUENCES

I

PERHAPS it was Burke's *Reflections* that, more than anything else, prejudiced British opinion—and not only British opinion—in regard to the French Revolution. At least one can affirm that it embodied and expressed the current English judgment. Published twenty years before Dickens was born, its influence extended unto his day and beyond. And though Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*, which fell upon its fiery eloquence like a douche of icy well-water, had had a sale which, even in these days of many editions, would be dubbed by the publishers "colossal," and which had furthermore achieved a veritable success of scandal—what one might call an Unpopular Success—from which no sensational elements of publicity were wanting, the name of that most unfortunate and harshly treated man of genius was held in such abhorrence by the vast majority who wear their respectability next their skin, that it is doubtful if any of his writings ever came Dickens's way at all. And, indisputably, Burke's highly coloured views of the social crisis created by the French Revolution were far more likely to appeal to any spirited young man than the coldly reasoned analysis of the great Radical—as Tom Paine was then called, among other things, in default of a worse—or better? —name. And indeed, to this day one still finds an overmastering witchery in Burke's book of *Lamenta-*

tions, which has a power to play upon the heartstrings of the romantically minded as the fingers of the skilled musician play upon the chords of a harp. His rhetoric is so full of a passionate cadence that it woos you like sweet singing heard through a murmur of sighs, a veil of unshed tears.

". . . the age of chivalry is gone," he cries. "That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil by losing all its grossness."

What had poor Tom Paine, with his plain common sense, to set against these captivating sentiments? Only that "so far is it from being true, as has been pretended, that the abolition of any formal government is the dissolution of society, that it acts by a contrary impulse, and brings the latter the closer together. All that part of its organization, which it had committed to its government, devolves again upon itself, and acts through its medium. When men, as well from natural instinct as from reciprocal benefits, have habituated themselves to social and civilized life, there is always enough of its principles in practice to carry them through any changes they may find necessary or convenient to make in their government. In short, man is so naturally a creature of society that it is almost impossible to put him out of it."

Inevitably, public opinion scorned the rationalist in favour of the sentimentalist.

And, thanks to a most opportune intervention, public opinion was enabled to do still better for its own ease of mind than that. It was enabled absolutely to ignore all that had immediately preceded the appearance of Napoleon on the world's stage. For half a century, at least, the gorgeous pageantry of his deeds and his undoing quite sufficed to fill the eye, to exercise the imagination, to engage the critical faculties.

For the eager soul in quest of sensational provender there was no need to travel further back into the past than the beginning of 1801, when, following on Napoleon's election as First Consul, Nelson had been promoted Vice-Admiral of the Fleet, and had formally entered upon that brilliant unbroken series of victories which finally, at Trafalgar, shattered the Corsican upstart's fond dreams of establishing France as a first-class naval power. In Dickens's early days a man had only to be in the prime of life to recall those parlous times when England had twittered with apprehension before the rumour of a new invasion of our coasts such as she had not been threatened with since the days of the Great Armada. There were gnarled and battered old salts, lacking an eye or a limb, who could spin you authentic yarns of the press-gang and of the ding-dong practice of laying-to your foe and beating him out of the water, one down, t'other come on, which was all those old sea-dogs professed to know of naval strategy. Scarred old warriors in plenty who had fought under Clive in India and under Wellesley at Seringapatam and elsewhere against the sanguinary Tippo Sahib; who had gone into the Peninsular War as battle-stained veterans, and could tell you all—and more—about that long victorious campaign; who had followed the Iron Duke and helped in the consummation of his fame on the 18th June, 1815: these still spread abroad the

glory of our British arms, and kept the national self-love alive in their own persons. The memory of their feats did more: it filled the great gulf—a very Valley of Gehenna—fixed between those already seemingly far-off days of the Reign of Terror and that present era of piping peace. The retrospective gaze of 1830 had visions enough to glut itself upon in a panoramic review of the events of the century's first fifteen years. The rise and fall of the first French Republic belonged already to the distant past that only the lapse of years could bring into due perspective again. For the time being it was obscured by a cloud of later, more momentous happenings.

And Dickens was—in most salient aspects of his character, at least—essentially a man who belonged to his own period. To that fact is no doubt attributable his overwhelming popularity. But it involved some serious disabilities also.

I think it is often too lightly assumed that Dickens was very ill-acquainted with the work of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries in the higher walks of literature; though, beyond question, there was never anything of the mere bookman about him at any time. And probably, in his early days, he knew surprisingly little of the great poets who had attained their apogee when he was only just emerging from his swaddling-clothes. In later life we know that he was intimate with Walter Savage Landor, and liked him extremely. At the same time it cannot be gainsaid that his liking was tinctured with a feeling of something perilously akin to good-natured tolerance. In one of his letters to Forster this significant reference occurs: "As Landor would say, 'most woonderful'"; and somehow that seems to suggest rather a keen sense of the humour of the personal friend's peculiarities and mannerisms than any very adequate appreciation of the great poet's superb qualities of mind. And everybody is aware, of

course, that Landor figured as Boythorn in *Bleak House*. Now Landor was a born rebel. Because of his outspoken sympathies with the French Revolutionaries he had been known at Oxford as "the mad Jacobin," and eventually rusticated therefrom. All his life he had held the most heterodox views on every conceivable subject—among others, that Napoleon was a ridiculously overrated man. He was, indeed, as much an insurgent in temperament as either Shelley or Byron, whose unpopular opinions on politics and religion he shared and espoused. But it is plain that Dickens miraculously escaped these influences which so deeply affected other young men of his age and time. It will be shown in a future chapter that he could hardly have been entirely ignorant of the existence of these turbulent spirits; but presumably he was not attracted by their mutinous methods, and did not trouble to investigate for himself their claims to a fair and impartial hearing. In short, it is most likely that if he considered them at all, he adopted the conventional thin attitude toward them of scornful indifference, shot with horror and loathing.

Thus he missed an early chance of emancipating himself from the thrall of those unworthy and stultifying prejudices with which his natural gifts of clear insight and foresight were later on to come so often into conflict, and which consistently hampered him at every new stage of his development.

II

But there were other influences that he successfully resisted and overcame.

It has been shown that he was born at a time when all the countries of Europe were in the throes of a struggle against France for independent national existence. His earliest years must have been spent in an

atmosphere rife with stories of bloodshed and violence, of battle, murder and sudden death. As a boy he must have given eager ear to countless stirring tales of the wars that had lately convulsed the whole Western world, if only for the reason that his family was distantly related to, but closely connected with, the daughter of a lieutenant in the navy and the son of an army surgeon. This army surgeon's son, James Lamert, was, indeed, little Charles's constant companion and playmate at Chatham; and we read how that "it was in the boys' playing-ground near Clover Lane, in which the school stood, that, according to one of his youthful memories, he had been, in the hay-making time, delivered from the dungeons of Seringapatam (an immense pile of hay-cock) by his countrymen, the victorious British (boy next door and his two cousins), and had been recognized with ecstasy by his affianced one (Miss Green), who had come all the way from England (second house in the terrace) to ransom and marry him. It was in this playing-field, too, as he has himself recorded, he first heard in confidence from one whose father was greatly connected, 'being under Government,' of the existence of a terrible banditti called the *Radicals*, whose principles were that the Prince Regent wore stays, that nobody had a right to any salary, and that the army and navy ought to be put down; horrors at which he trembled in his bed, after supplicating that the Radicals might be speedily taken and hanged." Chatham, then, was the birthplace of his fancy . . . "there the most durable of his early impressions were received; and the associations that were around him when he died were those which at the outset of his life had affected him most strongly."

When the time came, in 1821, for him to leave that dockyard town, so famous for its naval and military associations, its barracks, its forts, and its arsenals, and to go to London, he was nine years old; and it is

written that "he hardly knew what store he had set by its busy varieties of change and scene until he saw the falling cloud that was to hide its pictures from him for ever. . . . In leaving the place, he had often been heard to say, he seemed to be leaving . . . everything that had given his ailing little life its picturesqueness and sunshine. . . . The gay, bright regiments always coming and going, the continual paradings and firings, the succession of sham fights and sham defences, the plays got up by his cousin in the hospital, the navy-pay yacht in which he had sailed to Sheerness with his father, and the ships floating out in the Medway, with their far visions of sea—he was to lose them all. He was never to watch the boys at their games any more, or to see them sham over again the sham sieges or defences."

Yet in spite of these early surroundings, which, as we have seen, had their inevitable effect in influencing Dickens's boyish imagination, he nevertheless manifested throughout his life a full share of the modern Socialist spirit of anti-Militarism.

. . . "'If you could have seen me, Mr. Pinch,' cried Montague Tigg on an historic occasion, 'at the head of my regiment on the coast of Africa, charging in the form of a hollow square, with the women and the children and the regimental plate-chest in the centre, you would not have known me for the same man. You would have respected me, sir.' Tom had certain ideas of his own on the subject of glory; and consequently he was not quite so much excited by this picture as Mr. Tigg could have desired."

And Tom Pinch's ideas were Dickens's too. For it is a remarkable circumstance of his career that, though he was born in a seaport, and brought up in the midst of men who had fought under Wellington in India, in Spain, and in Belgium, and under Nelson in the Baltic and in the Mediterranean, and though he lived through

the strenuous periods of the Crimea and the Indian Mutiny, and was saturated with all manner of war-lore, yet he went out of his way to avoid description of a battlefield, just as he refrained from putting the heroism of sudden effort before the day-to-day, hand-to-mouth fight of the poor.

That war of any kind, defensive or aggressive, is a stupid and barbarous and utterly indefensible method of settling international or any other differences was one of those obvious facts that a man possessed of such robust common sense as Dickens could not fail fully to realize. Not once, despite the temptations to do so that, considering his upbringing, must continually have beset him, did Dickens apply his art in any way that could be construed into any sort of glorification of the soldier's calling. He knew full well that God is far more often than not on the side of the big battalions; and that there is more than a mere nuance of vulgarity, that there is a certain brutal wisdom, in fact, in the parodist's flippant addition to Shakespeare's line:

> Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just . . .
> But four times he who gets his blow in fust.

There is, for instance, never a word in Dickens's books, and, so far as the writer has been able to find out, no mention whatever in his letters, of the Indian Mutiny; and only a few most casual references in his letters to the Crimean War. And wherever these do occur, it is more commonly the humours of militarism, rather than what to some people seem its impressive features, that engage his attention. In this connection, some notion of his point of view may be gleaned from what he wrote on his experiences in France in 1854.

"The formation of the Northern Camp at Boulogne began the week after he had finished *Hard Times*, and he watched its progress, as it increased and extended itself along the cliffs towards Calais, with the liveliest

amusement. At first he was startled by the suddenness with which soldiers overran the roads, became billeted in every house, made the bridges red with their trousers, and 'sprang upon the pier like fantastic mustard and cress when boats were expected, many of them never having seen the sea before. . . .' His patience was a little tried when he found baggage-waggons ploughing up his favourite walks, and trumpeters in twos and threes teaching newly recruited trumpeters in all the sylvan places, and making the echoes hideous. But this had its amusement, too. 'I met to-day a weazen sunburnt youth from the south with such an immense regimental shako on that he looked like a sort of lucifer match-box, evidently blowing his life rapidly out, under the auspices of two magnificent creatures all hair and lungs, of such breadth across the shoulders that I couldn't see their breast-buttons when I stood in front of them.' "

Nothing here, you see, of thrilling at the sight of these noble fellows. No; to Dickens, as to many others, soldiers were funny; and the sight of a vast number of men, all ridiculously tricked out, and all doing the same thing together, was a highly ludicrous spectacle. Nor was there much of the red glamour of war in the eyes of Dickens when he wrote, sardonically:—

" I believe everything I hear. It is the state of mind of Hood's country gentleman after the fire at the Houses of Parliament. Beaucourt (his landlord), as one of the town council, receives summonses to turn out and debate about something, or receive somebody, every five minutes. Whenever I look out of the window, or go to the door, I see an immense black object at Beaucourt's porch like a boat set up on end in the air with a pair of white trousers below it. This is the cocked hat of an official Huissier, newly arrived with a summons, whose head is thrown back as he is in the act of drinking Beaucourt's wine."

Again, in more trenchant wise :—

"The Fair is on, under the walls of the haute ville over the way. At one popular show, the Malakhoff is taken every half-hour between 4 and 11. Bouncing explosions announce every triumph of the French arms (the English have nothing to do with it); and in the intervals the man outside blows a railway-whistle—straight into the dining-room. Do you know that the French soldiers call their English medal 'The Salvage Medal,' meaning that they have got it for saving the English Army? I don't suppose there are a thousand people in all France who believe that we did anything but get rescued by the French. And I am confident that the no-result of our precious Chelsea inquiry has wonderfully strengthened this conviction. Nobody at home has yet any adequate idea, I am deplorably sure, of what the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office have done for us."

How curiously up-to-date it all reads—almost as if the words proceeded out of the mouth of a modern newspaper correspondent! But one misses the heroics.

At a play he went to in Paris the performance was stopped while the news of the last Crimean engagement was read from the stage.

"It made not the faintest effect upon the audience; and even the hired claquers, who had been absurdly loud during the piece, seemed to consider the war not at all within their contract, and were as stagnant as ditch-water. The theatre was full. It is quite impossible to see such apathy and suppose the war to be popular, whatever may be asserted to the contrary."

No trace of enthusiasm, of latent war-fever, here. No bitter cry of protest against the dull, indifferent attitude of the people. But rather a sense of grim satisfaction that things should be so, and the miserable political plot, with its catch-penny motives, should have ignominiously failed of its object. . . . Yet Dickens

was at some pains to run up the French colours over a British Union Jack that he had brought from England to hoist near his domicile at Boulogne, this seemingly incongruous act being also strictly in accordance with his character.

CHAPTER III

THE DARK YEARS OF HIS BOYHOOD

I

AT the risk of being charged with egoism, the present writer would like to say, before proceeding further, that he thinks he possesses at least one unusual and undeniable qualification for the task he has taken in hand, in that his own experiences in early life were very similar to Dickens's. He, like Dickens, was brought up in poverty, and started work on his own account at an age when more fortunate children are seriously beginning their education. He has known what it is to be perpetually hungry and ill-clad and to suffer those worse pangs of secret shame which Dickens describes so poignantly in one of his few fragments of autobiography and in *David Copperfield*.

" ' No words can express,' he says, ' the secret agony of my soul as I sank into this companionship ; compared these everyday associates with those of my happier childhood ; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly without hope now ; of the shame I felt in my position ; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day what I had learned and thought and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more ; cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and

humiliation of such considerations that even now . . . I often forget in my dreams that . . . I am a man, and wander desolately back to that time of my life. . . . From Monday morning until Saturday night I had no advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no assistance, no support, of any kind, from anyone, that I can call to mind. . . . I know that I lounged about the streets insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed. I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond. . . . That I suffered in secret, and that I suffered exquisitely, no one ever knew but I. How much I suffered, it is, as I have said already, utterly beyond my power to tell. No man's imagination can overstep the reality. But I kept my own counsel, and I did my work. . . . My rescue from this kind of existence I considered quite hopeless and abandoned as such, altogether; though I am solemnly convinced that I never, for one hour, was reconciled to it, or was otherwise than miserably unhappy.' "

And, though it may read like arrogance, the present writer dares to add that only a man who has suffered in the same way can hope properly to appreciate Dickens's character.

In a letter to Washington Irving Dickens once described himself as having been " a very small and not-over-particularly-taken-care-of-boy." He was, indeed, both frail and weakly. A distressing nervous affection to which he was chronically subject debarred him from joining in the sports and pastimes of other boys of his own age and condition. Thus he early became a spectator of life, rather than an active participant in it. It seems to have been his chief delight to sit and look on whilst others worked or played. And the grave, watchful eyes of a child see more clearly in their innocent regard than the trained observation of many a sophisticated man. He was a lonely child, too; and there is

nothing like loneliness for making one intimate with strangers. Every man, woman, and child who crossed his dreamy purview, no matter how transitory or trivial the part they played before him, was, each one, to his quick fancy, the embodied hero or heroine of some deep intrigue or thrilling romance. "If," says Dickens in *David Copperfield*, "it should appear from anything I may set down in this narrative that I was a child of close observation, or that as a man I have a strong memory of my childhood, I undoubtedly lay claim to both of these characteristics . . . though I think the memory of most of us can go farther back into such times than many of us suppose; just as I believe that the power of observation in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. Indeed, I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect, may with greater propriety be said not to have lost the faculty than to have acquired it; the rather, as I generally observe such men to retain a certain freshness and gentleness and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood." And (as Forster adds) "applicable as it might be to David Copperfield, this was unaffectedly true of Charles Dickens."

Of course he became, as all children of a lively imaginative temperament and sickly habit of body must inevitably tend to become, passionately fond of reading. He read, indiscriminately, every work he could lay his hands on. But what he read is not nearly so important to the purpose of this undertaking as what he saw and thought and suffered. It was to the atmosphere of shabby-genteel squalors and difficulties into which he was plunged at nine years old that he owed his mature powers of sympathy with, and insight into, the pettifogging miseries of the decent poor. Into the three years that immediately followed the removal of the

Dickens family from Chatham to Bayham Street in Camden Town in London he crammed a mass of first-hand knowledge of life in its most sordid and bitter aspects which would have sufficed to stock him with enough material for the work of half a dozen careers even as crowded and strenuous as his. Over all his books, from *Pickwick Papers* to *Edwin Drood*, lies the trail of those hard boyish experiences. It was during this period that he first began to develop those rare gifts of understanding and intuition which were afterwards to lay the foundations of his fame.

"That he took, from the very beginning of this Bayham Street life, his first impression of that struggling poverty which is nowhere more vividly shown than in the commoner streets of the ordinary London suburb, and which enriched his earliest writings with a freshness of original humour and quite unstudied pathos that gave them much of their sudden popularity, there cannot be a doubt. 'I certainly understood it,' he often said, 'quite as well then as I do now.' But he was not conscious yet that he did so understand it, or of the influence it was exerting on his life even then. It seems almost too much to assert of a child, say at nine or ten years old, that his observation of everything was as close and good, or that he had as much intuitive understanding of the character and weaknesses of the grown-up people around him, as when the same keen and wonderful faculty had made him famous among men." But the experience of those most closely acquainted with Dickens led them, nevertheless, "to put implicit faith in the assertion he unvaryingly himself made, that he had never seen any cause to correct or change what in his boyhood was his own secret impression of anybody whom he had, as a grown man, the opportunity of testing in later years."

To this the present writer would add that so far from there being anything remarkable in these evidences of

Dickens's precocity, it is inconceivable that he could have acquired just these indelible impressions in any other way. For there is no class that is so proud and self-contained as the honest, self-respecting poor. There is no class that so strives to hide the mean shifts and sorry expedients to which it is driven by lack of means; or that takes so much pains to cheat its neighbours and would-be helping friends into a belief that its circumstances are completely comfortable and happy. Had Dickens approached this most sensitive, shrinking class, which he made to yield up, first to himself and then to a world of readers halting between delight and superciliousness and incredulity, all the hoarded secrets of its homely manners and customs, in their varyingly droll and sad, comic and tragic, aspects: had he approached them from any side but the inside, then he would of a surety have failed to paint a wholly true and faithful picture of them, as every other writer, before or since, has failed who lacked that indispensable subjective knowledge. And only a child, as he was, would have been permitted by them to see so much of unconscious intimate self-revelation. His Kenwigses and his Toodles, the Marchioness and the Micawbers, the Plornishes and the Snagsbys, Jo Gargery, and the Wilfers —these, queer and strange as they may seem to the uninitiated, and impossible as they may be declared by the pundits, stand as eloquent witnesses of the extent to which he seized his priceless, unique opportunities.

II

This is the claim, then, that the present writer would put forward: that Dickens was a realist with a temperament; that he viewed life from the standpoint of a man who recognizes in all his fellow-mortals the same common human traits and foibles, without dis-

tinction of class or rank or wealth. Men and women were equally absurd or fine, admirable or the reverse, according to their essential qualities of mind and character, and in no other way.

And there never was a novelist more free from the influences of any of his literary predecessors than Dickens. That, as a boy, he probably read Richardson, and certainly Fielding, Sterne, Goldsmith, and Smollett, we know; and his confession that he had often impersonated his favourite figures in their books, had been Tom Jones (a child's Tom Jones, a harmless creature) for a week together; and had sustained his own idea of Roderick Random for a month at a stretch, goes to show that they had taken a great hold on his imagination. That there are traces of the influence of both Fielding and Smollett in certain passages and scenes and in the style of his earlier novels, is also undeniable. The opening of Chapter VI of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is pure Fielding, for example; and parts of *Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* suffer considerably from their reminiscent flavour of Smollett. Still it remains that his genius was unusually and distinctively individual, belonging to no school; and that he brought to bear on his experiences the clear vision of one who sees and judges for himself.

And, not being infallible, it may be flung to his critics that he judged wrongly, even perversely. His attitude in regard to the nice point of the relations between debtor and creditor, for instance, was conspicuously affected by his wholly natural sympathy with his foolish, feckless father, who would seem to have lived in a perpetual state of financial stress. To the end of his life Dickens never seemed to perceive that the creditor is, far oftener than not, more to be pitied than the debtor; or that a man has no more right to incur obligations which he has no very sure expectation of being able to meet than he has to commit a burglary.

Invariably he depicts the poor defrauded tradesman clamouring for his just dues in the most unfavourable light possible. "Neither a borrower nor a lender be, For . . . borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry" is a Shakespearean axiom that he had assuredly never laid to his own soul. He extracts an infinity of humorous enjoyment out of the miserable chicanery of such arch-wastrels as Dick Swiveller, where a man with a truer sense of equity in such matters would heap condemnation.

His obliquity of moral vision in this particular arose, of course, out of the fact that wherever his sympathies were warmly engaged on one side he was a little prone to disregard the claims of the other side. His childish recollections of the wretched Debtors' Prison in which it was his father's fate to be incarcerated, and his early insight into the causes that landed him there, warped his maturer judgment and blinded him altogether to the consideration that the genteel person who lives by betraying the good faith of those who supply him with the necessaries of life, to say nothing of actual ready cash, is really a meaner sort of thief than the needy criminal who picks a pocket and runs the open risk of imprisonment.

One has only to study, without prejudice, the character of Micawber, who was admittedly founded on the elder Dickens, to acknowledge that though he may have been an extremely ingratiating and highly amusing rascal, he was a rascal all the same, and an idle and self-indulgent rascal into the bargain, who deserved a good deal worse than he got. But because Micawber could sell his bedstead in order to entertain his friends in riotous and wasteful fashion, whilst ruin brooded over his home and the hapless family dependent on him, we are confidently invited to admire him—as Dickens undoubtedly did admire and even respect his father—and to ignore the plain fact that Micawber was so lost

to honour that he could take advantage of the simple good nature of a confiding friend, and by deceit and cajolery contrive to transfer the load of his own imminent liabilities on to that innocent friend's shoulders.

But this is merely to concede that Dickens was a sentimentalist, "which nobody can deny," and to repeat what has hereinbefore been stated—that he was also a man who belonged peculiarly to the period in which he lived, who always tried to observe the conventions, and to adopt the popular point of view in so far as he possibly could, consistently with his own sense of what was seemly and fitting. And then there is this further circumstance to be considered.

Almost up to the time of Dickens's death the state of English feeling in regard to questions of debt was a curious muddle of laxity and severity. It was not until the Debtors Act of 1869 was passed that imprisonment for actual debt was finally done away with. Until the date of a previous Act of 1861, which abolished the distinction, insolvency had been a term strictly confined to the case of a non-trader who was unable to settle his debts in full; but all who were *bona-fide* traders were said to be not insolvent but bankrupt, the difference being that bankrupts, by paying a composition approved by the court, could free themselves from their liabilities and make a fresh start, whilst insolvents must remain in prison until the court granted them their discharge under certain stringent conditions or they were able to satisfy or placate their creditors in some way.

It would, however, be out of place here to enter at all exhaustively into this matter; but still it may perhaps be pointed out that the then existing state of the law reflected pretty accurately the state of feeling of the majority on the general question of debt and debtors: a feeling which Dickens largely shared. So long as the

debtor took a sporting chance of going to gaol for his malpractices he was reckoned a bit of a hero, a roystering blade. In short, he occupied the position in public estimation that the knights of the road—who professed to rob the rich to give to the poor—had held a hundred years or thereabouts previously. It was felt that there was something dare-devilish and dashing and rather admirable than otherwise in the behaviour of a reckless spendthrift who gave no thought to the morrow, who spent as he went, and put his own interpretation on the text beginning "Sufficient for the day——". No doubt this tradition had come down from the days of the Prince Regent and his beggarly crew of pimps and pandars, a day in which it was considered a gallant and splendid thing to cheat an honest tradesman out of his gear, and to wreak poetic injustice upon the Jews for their notorious propensities in the direction of spoiling the Philistines.

But that the practice of herding indiscriminately together a number of dissolute and unfortunate men, and whilst denying them their liberty encouraging them in all manner of licentious habits—in idleness, debauchery, drunkenness, and gambling—that this was altogether blameworthy cannot for a moment be gainsaid. At the same time the outpourings of unqualified pity and compassion which were lavished upon this dreadful *hoi polloi* of discredited swindlers and improvidents, rake-hells and unfortunates, without distinction, was not less vicious. Indeed, had Dickens been living to-day, it is quite conceivable that he might have agitated for a partial revival of those same laws of imprisonment for debt which he denounced in such trenchant style during the time of their operation. For he would have seen that as things stand now the way is made far too clear for the gangs of unscrupulous financiers and speculators who exploit the savings of the people to their own ends, and also for those pestilential members of our

aristocracy and plutocracy who find the Bankruptcy Court a most convenient means of purging themselves of their responsibilities; whilst in many cases the poor struggling debtor—whom the Debtors Act was expressly intended to protect—is still subject to imprisonment for the non-payment of comparatively trifling sums which, despite the edicts of our modern Justinians, he is often utterly unable to pay. Indeed, the present state of the Bankruptcy Laws is a direct incitement to greedy gamblers of the Stock Exchange type to indulge in such vile malpractices as the distortion of the Married Women's Property Act, and others, in such a way as to safeguard the proceeds of their nefarious projects.

Here, then, is an instance in which the tendencies of Dickens's nature, manifesting itself in a spirit of whole-souled altruism that included in its widespread benevolence the victims of every form of suffering and misery, betrayed the habitual soundness of his judgment. He realized that the Law of Imprisonment for Debt was inherently unsound as well as wrong and cruel; but knowing nothing of the remedies that an enlightened Socialism would apply to that evil, as well as to all other economic evils, he was unable to realize that its mere repeal was altogether insufficient to meet all the exigencies of the case; that whilst it did free an unfortunate few from the burden of an unjust penalty, it paved the way for a still graver injustice in that it absolved the avaricious many from the fears of a righteous retribution.

But whilst Dickens's early initiation into the secret woes of poverty and the horrors of prison life stultified him in one or two minor directions perhaps, it enlarged him in many important others. It familiarized him with what has come to be called the seamy side of life—that side being commonly the most honest as well as the ugliest side of a garment. It taught him to pity all

those who are desolate and oppressed, all prisoners and captives; and prepared his mind for the still more harsh experiences that he was presently to undergo in his own small person during that period of his servitude on which he afterwards dwelt so painfully in the words quoted in the first section of this chapter.

It was well that he should have gained an insight into the general unsatisfactoriness of the lot of innumerable others before he himself was made to feel the unsatisfactoriness of his own lot. Had he been suddenly cast down from a state of ease and plenty into such an abyss of want and privation the effect upon him would very likely have been—to put it mildly—very much the reverse of beneficial. He might even have lighted upon the devastating conviction that he alone of all humanity was malignantly singled out to be thus wantonly despited, instead of realizing that what he had to endure was the common lot of untold multitudes of his fellow-beings all like unto himself.

III

Affliction falls never so heavily and crushingly as when it falls on those who have hitherto known nothing of the inner meaning of suffering. On them it falls with a deadening effect of utter and irrevocable doom from which there seems to be no hope of escape, and in which there is not the least possibility of mitigation. (We have seen how even the child Dickens had that feeling; but for him, of course, there was a providential City of Refuge through the portals of his imagination.) It is not until we have learned to recognize that comfort and consolation are from within; and that man is a creature ultimately dependent not on material things for a means of joy and contentment, but on the causes that spring from his own heart; it is not until then that we are fit

to face the more tragic issues that threaten the least and the greatest of us, with any likelihood of emerging triumphant from the conflict with them: the better and the nobler for the purifying and annealing process. The pain and sorrow that afflict those of us who have not yet appreciated how vast is the sum of pain and sorrow which racks the world, and to which the sum of happiness is only as the small piece of leaven that leavens the whole lump, are far more likely to narrow and restrict the bounds of our sympathy than to extend them. Thus it is well that we should be at some pains to acquaint ourselves with the lives of our less fortunate fellows whilst there is yet time, lest the hour fall when we ourselves shall be plunged into the outer darkness without having first enlightened our souls with understanding. And thus it was well for Dickens (and incidentally for us) that he should have touched life at so many points, also.

The dreary, weary days spent in the blacking factory near Hungerford Stairs: "a crazy, tumble-down, old house abutting on the river, and literally overrun with rats"; his monotonous hourly task, which was "to cover the pots of paste-blacking, first with a piece of oil-paper and then with a piece of blue paper, to tie them round with a string, and then to clip the paper close and neat all round until it looked as smart as a pot of ointment from an apothecary's shop . . . then to paste on each a printed label"; his long, tiresome journeys to and from the lodgings in Gower Street, where his mother and sisters were temporarily installed, pending the father's release from prison, and afterwards his walks to and from the Borough, involving the pathetic confession: "I was so young and childish, and so little qualified—how could I be otherwise?—to undertake the whole charge of my existence that in going to Hungerford Stairs of a morning I could not resist the stale pastry put out at half-price on trays at

the confectioners' doors in Tottenham Court Road, and I often spent in that way the money I should have kept for dinner"; the lonely meals bought at some cheap, unsavoury shop, a saveloy and a penny loaf, an occasional fourpenny plate of beef, sometimes a plate of bread and cheese and a glass of beer partaken of in some frowsy public-house; the sad Sundays spent in the Marshalsea, and the secret shame of his connection with that debtors' prison as revealed in the following passage: "Bob Fagin was very good to me on the occasion of a bad attack of my old disorder . . . I got better and quite easy towards evening; but Bob (who was much bigger and older than I) did not like the idea of my going home alone, and took me under his protection. I was too proud to let him know about the prison, and after several efforts to get rid of him, to all of which Bob Fagin in his goodness was deaf, shook hands with him on the steps of a house near Southwark Bridge, on the Surrey side, making believe that I lived there"; and then the inevitable humorous touch: "As a finishing piece of reality in case of his looking back, I knocked at the door, I recollect, and asked, when the woman opened it, if that was Mr. Robert Fagin's house"; the hungry, aimless wanderings in Covent Garden Market to kill time when his belly and his pockets alike were empty; and arising out of all this, the vindication of his superiority to the conditions that surrounded him: "But I held some station in the blacking warehouse, too . . . I knew from the first that if I could not do my work as well as any of the rest I could not hold myself above slight and contempt. I soon became at least as expeditious and skilful with my hands as either of the other boys. Though perfectly familiar with them, my conduct and manners were different enough from theirs to place a space between us. They and the men always spoke of me as 'the young gentleman'"; all these early and unwonted ex-

periences had a transcendent value in the making of a potential Socialist out of the man, which it would not be easy to over-estimate; and, lightly as they are passed over here, it would be altogether impossible to omit.

CHAPTER IV

HIS SCHOOLDAYS AND YOUTH

I

AN improvement in the fortunes of the Dickens family at last plucked Charles out of his menial state of drudgery, and he was taken away from the blacking factory, never to return. In his own words: "My father said I should go back no more, and should go to school. I do not write resentfully or angrily, for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am; but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back."

In this brief reference there is matter for consideration, indeed! First, in Dickens's own frank acknowledgment of the debt that his successful career owed to his early experiences of hardship and poverty and suffering; and again in the revelation it affords of the sort of woman his mother was.

Now there is extraordinarily little known of the elder Mrs. Dickens. The many books written around her illustrious son contain only the most cursory mention of her name. But this fierce, bitter allusion to her (for Dickens's natural protest may be ignored: he doth protest too much) throws a vivid sidelight on her character. It explains a strange deficiency in all Dickens's books: a deficiency in the sense that whereas most men recall throughout their lives a feeling of intense love and duty and gratitude toward their mother's memory, Dickens's

work is strikingly free from any expression, definite or implied, of this feeling. There is not a real mother in all his crowded gallery of immortal figures; David Copperfield's mother is just an inane, pretty-pretty abstraction, and that is all. With two exceptions, in *Nicholas Nickleby* and in *Barnaby Rudge*, his heroes have all been bereft of their mothers in their infancy. The mother of Barnaby Rudge is a more melodramatic figure. Remains, then, Mrs. Nickleby, who—we have the author's own word for it—was his own mother in disguise: an empty-headed, foolish, vain gossip whom her children have to humour and coax at every turn with the patient, long-suffering kindness that one shows toward a naughty, intractable child. But we know the kind of father Dickens had: a very indifferent kind; yet Dickens loved him dearly, proving that he did not want in filial affection. May it not be, then, since he was habitually so reticent about his mother, and betrays in his writings so poor a sense of the inestimable blessing of a good mother, that he was unfortunate in this parent; and that to the lack of a wise and worthy mother's influence is due one of the most serious defects in his mental equipment: a defect that manifests itself in his alternately maudlin or cheapening or flippant treatment of the whole sex?

The mother of a great man is always important. Her character cannot fail to have a vital effect on the character of her son. One might suggest, then, perhaps, that Dickens's always slightly contemptuous attitude toward the things he had not taken the trouble to understand was in fact an hereditary trait directly derived from his mother. The idea is put forward diffidently, but in all seriousness, as a possible explanation of Dickens's more obvious inconsistencies and limitations. But the point may wait, for the present.

To pass on to his next move in life, which can be given in his own language:—

"There was a school in the Hampstead Road kept by a Mr. Jones, a Welshman, to which my father despatched me to ask for a card of terms. The boys were at dinner, and Mr. Jones was carving for them, with a pair of holland sleeves on, when I acquitted myself of this commission. He came out, and gave me what I wanted, and hoped I should soon become a pupil. I did. At seven o'clock one morning, very soon afterwards, I went as a day scholar to Mr. Jones's establishment."

The reader is referred to that chapter in *Reprinted Pieces* entitled "Our School," for a fuller description of this remarkable academy of learning which, if it be not substantially true in detail (as one of Dickens's schoolfellows alleges in a letter hereinafter quoted), is worth reading for its own sake, and especially for the fleeting glimpse it gives of the schoolmaster :—

"The master was supposed among us to know nothing, and one of the ushers was supposed to know everything. We are still inclined to think the first-named supposition perfectly correct. We had a general idea that its subject had been in the leather-trade, and had bought us —meaning Our School—of another proprietor who was immensely learned. Whether this belief had any real foundation we are not likely ever to know now. The only branches of education with which he showed the least acquaintance were ruling and corporally punishing. He was always ruling cipher-books with a bloated mahogany ruler, or smiting the palms of offenders with the same diabolical instrument, or viciously drawing a pair of pantaloons tight with one of his large hands and caning the wearer with the other. We have no doubt whatever that this occupation was the principal solace of his existence."

And now for some extracts from the schoolfellows' letters which, it will be seen, directly contradict one another, as reminiscences by different hands untrained

in the accurate representation of bygone events and scenes are very liable to do. The first, Mr. Owen P. Thomas, writes :—

" You will find a graphic sketch of the school by Mr. Dickens himself . . . entitled ' Our School.' The names, of course, are feigned, but allowing for slight colouring, the persons and incidents described are all true to life and easily recognizable by anyone who attended the school at the time. . . . My recollection of Dickens . . . is that of a healthy-looking boy,' and so on. ' I cannot recall anything that then indicated he would hereafter become a literary celebrity ; but perhaps he was too young then.' "

This is delicious !

And the other correspondent, a Dr. Henry Danson, is just as beautifully Victorian, and displays exactly similar misconceptions as to what are the signs of budding genius. He says :—

" Wellington Academy . . . was considered at the time a very superior sort of school, one of the best indeed in that part of London ; but it was most shamefully mismanaged, and the boys made but very little progress. . . . The lively account Dickens gives of it . . . is very mythical in many respects, and more especially in the compliment he pays in it to himself. I do not remember that Dickens distinguished himself in any way or carried off any prizes. My belief is that he did not learn Latin or Greek there, and you will remember there is no allusion to the classics in any of his writings. . . . Depend on it he was quite a self-made man, and his wonderful knowledge and command of the English language must have been acquired by long and patient study after leaving his last school."

There are some loose statements and some looser reasoning in these extracts that should be set straight. Dickens certainly studied Latin ; for in a letter written when he was thirteen he refers to " my Clavis " ; and

the notion that only a man familiar with the classics ever alludes to them is one that any office-boy, writing to the papers on The Mutability of Human Life, could quite easily confute. Further, that a knowledge and command of the English language are to be acquired by long and patient study is a simple fallacy that the thousands of unreadable books written by Oxford dons and professors of literature have exposed again and again.

However, Dickens left this school at the age of fifteen ; and that finished the period of his formal education. It is a period on which we have very little clear or trustworthy information ; and altogether it seems to have covered not more than three years, much of which time was wasted on a most haphazard and altogether unsatisfactory course of instruction. But that it had its educative value apart from this is quite plain. It restored to the boy his self-respect. It rekindled his joy in life ; and, above all, set flowing that inexhaustible fount of high spirits and gaiety which bubbled up in an effervescent stream, bright and sparkling, to the very last.

II

Dickens's first employment after finally leaving school was in a solicitor's office. And here again the present writer is privileged to follow him with a sense of fellowship, because he also has had some considerable experience of what happens behind those cobwebby and costly scenes of inaction.

It would seem (but information on this point of Dickens's clerking days is vague to the verge of filminess) that he went first into the office of a Mr. Molloy in New Square, Lincoln's Inn ; but whether or not this was so, Dickens certainly had not quitted school many

months before his father had made sufficient interest with an attorney of Gray's Inn, Mr. Edward Blackmore, to obtain him regular employment in his office. In this capacity of clerk our only trustworthy glimpse of him we owe to the last-named gentleman, who has described briefly, and I do not doubt authentically, the services so rendered by Dickens to the law. It cannot be said that they were noteworthy, though it might be difficult to find a more distinguished person who has borne the title, unless we make exception for the very father of literature himself, whom Chaucer, with amusing illustration of the way in which words change their meanings, called "that conceited clerke, Homère."

"'I was well acquainted,' writes Mr. Edward Blackmore of Alresford, 'with his parents, and being then in practice in Gray's Inn, they asked me if I could find employment for him. He was a bright, clever-looking youth, and I took him as a clerk. He came to me in May, 1827, and left in November, 1828; and I have now an account-book which he used to keep of petty disbursements in the office, in which he charged himself with the modest salary, first, of thirteen shillings and sixpence and afterwards of fifteen shillings a week. Several incidents took place in the office of which he must have been a keen observer, as I recognized some of them in his *Pickwick* and *Nickleby;* and I am much mistaken if some of his characters had not their originals in persons I well remember. . . .' This letter indicates the position he held at Mr. Blackmore's, and we have but to turn to the passage in *Pickwick* which describes the several grades of attorney's clerks to understand it more clearly. He was very far below the articled clerk, who has paid a premium, and is attorney in perspective. He was not so high as the salaried clerk with nearly the whole of his weekly thirty shillings spent on personal pleasures. He was not even

on a level with the middle-aged copying clerk, always needy and uniformly shabby. He was simply among, however much his nature may have lifted him above, the 'office-lads in their first surtouts, who feel a befitting contempt for boys at day-schools, club as they go home at night for saveloys and porter, and think there's nothing like life.' Thus far, not more or less, had he now reached. He was one of the office-lads, and probably in his first surtout."

But though his biographer's commentary is true enough, no doubt, the position of a solicitor's clerk—or any other clerk—in those days—was a good deal better than it is now. There were no Board schools then to render a working knowledge of at least the three R's practically a universal accomplishment. To be able to read and write and cipher in any degree of perfection was to stamp yourself as a youth of some attainments. The only free schools then in existence were Charity Schools, and the spirit which had animated their founders would hardly appear to have been that of the greatest of the three cardinal virtues: the charity which is love—if we are to judge by the following significant utterance by Bishop Butler, delivered at one of the earliest of the annual festivals of the charity children at St. Paul's Cathedral.

"The design of these institutions," the Bishop said, "was not in any sort to remove poor children out of the rank in which they were born, but keeping them in it, to give them the assistance which their circumstances plainly called for, by educating them in the principles of religion as well as of civil life; and likewise making some sort of provision for their maintenance, under which last I include clothing them; giving them such learning—if it is to be called by that name—as may qualify them for some common employment; and placing them out to it as they grow up."

These institutions rapidly multiplied during the end

of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. They were founded on a conception of education partly religious and partly feudal, but almost wholly ignoble and humiliating, and many of them have lasted down to our own day, in striking contrast to the grammar-school foundations of earlier generations. These charity-school children—" brats " was the popular description—were taught the Church Catechism, reading and writing, and in a few cases arithmetic, but were sedulously discouraged from attempting to learn more.

It was not until 1833, long after Dickens had left school, that any attempt was made by the Government to take over the business of the education of poor children; and then only a beggarly grant of £20,000 was voted for the erection of school buildings in England, and this sum was entrusted in its entirety to the National Society and the British and Foreign School Society, both of these bodies being largely under the control of the churchmen. Indeed, it was not until the time of that memorable Parliament of 1868, which, under the administration of Mr. Gladstone, was in many respects the most important Parliament from an educational point of view that ever sat in England, that the question of elementary teaching became a vital political issue. And only in the year of Dickens's death (in 1870) were the first School Boards created; and even so, the schools were still left far too largely in the hands of the clergy, as they continued to be until quite lately.

Again, Dickens had left school some four or five years when the Cotton Industry Act of 1831, which may properly be called the first Factory Act, was passed; and for fifty years or more previously, during the rapid development of the textile industries in Great Britain, the condition of hundreds of thousands of wretched children in England was so deplorably evil,

and the attitude assumed by the responsible authorities toward the question of child-labour was so unspeakably brutal and callous, that reports of the Parliamentary debates of that era read, to modern minds, more like a fierce satire on what actually occurred than the bare truth. The Cotton Mills Act of 1819, for instance, was hailed as a great meliorative measure, though it merely fixed the working age of children at nine years and the working week for them at seventy-two hours. Sir John Hobhouse's Saturday Half-Holiday Act did not come till 1825. And Tom Sadler's Ten Hours Bill of 1832 was lost through the opposition of the manufacturers; whilst Lord Ashley's Bill, which merely dealt with the working hours of adults, was met by the appointment under Whig auspices of a Royal Commission. The Report of this Commission (1833–34) took the view of the capitalists that such a restriction would so diminish production as to put them at the mercy of foreign competition. On its recommendation, however, was based Lord Althorp's Act of 1834, which first made the distinction between "children" and "young persons," and began the system of working children in relays, so as to permit of daily education. But more than thirty years were even yet to elapse before the presentation of the Report of the Royal Commission on Factory and Workshop Acts testified that their provisions were now operating successfully, and that while some occupations were still undoubtedly unhealthy in spite of the sanitary regulations of these Acts, the cases in which young people were employed in labour unfitted for their years had become uncommon. (And what a lying report it must have been!) But what is known as the great Statute of 1878 was supposed finally to consolidate the laws for the protection of children, and to put everything straight.

So, enough has been written to make it plain that any youth, between the years 1820 and 1830, belonging

to the poorer classes, who possessed even the rudiments of an education was, in a way, a being set apart, and could command a much better wage, in relation to its spending value, than any clerk nowadays. Even so, however, the solicitor's clerk was then, as he is now, one of the worst paid and least considered of his tribe.

III

But whatever Dickens's occupation may have lacked in the way of pecuniary reward and social standing was amply made good in his particular case by the rich and varied experience it afforded him in other and more valuable ways. It helped on the processes of his real education as a novelist and Socialist better perhaps than any other occupation could have done. It added to his mental equipment a knowledge of the worse side of human nature that is nowhere else so easily and surely obtainable by the observant and astute as in the purlieus of the law. That he realized to the full the immensity of his opportunities, and worked the mine of wealth thus providentially opened up to him to the last limits of its yield, is abundantly apparent in his books, not only in his explicit dealings with all manner of legal practitioners and their gangs of hangers-on, but in his facile manipulation of the motives of his baser characters.

Hitherto all his experiences had been bounded on the one hand by the hideous cruelties of circumstance, and on the other hand by the wonderful, enduring, inscrutable kindnesses of people who were comparative strangers, only linked to him by the bonds of a community in misfortune. He had already learnt the uplifting lesson that the harder one's lot, and the poorer and the more mean and ignorant one's associates, the better and nobler our fellow-creatures will prove themselves to be. For wherever there is great suffering there is

always great love also, set in its midst, all glorious and shining, like an image of the Christ. Wherever there are wounds and stripes there are always helping hands —commonly coarse and rough in grain—and tender hearts to pour out their unfailing store of healing balm, of pity and comfort. That flower of divinely sweet and gracious sympathy which speaks to the god-like strain in men and women as no other quality can, invariably flourishes best in soil that is watered with tears. ' Where poverty and pain are, there is ever to be found, growing out of its grime and filth, the fairest and most delicate blooms of virtue that our poor human nature is capable of putting forth. Little Charles Dickens had proved the truth of this in his own short life. He had found that no matter how grotesque or uncouth or unseemly those companions might be who had shared with him the dolours of his darkest days, and no matter how little they understood of his secret agonies and shames, they had been kind and gentle with him; they had shown themselves mindful of the weakness and shrinking sensitiveness of the child doomed to labour among them; they had held out to him the offer of their humble fellowship, had tried to make smoother the roughest places in the path his stumbling feet must tread, and to help him through the worst hours of his childish heart-sickness and bodily revolt. Indeed, one cannot but be an optimist—in regard to human nature, at least—if one has lived among the poor as one of themselves. The sickly growths of cynicism wilt and fade in that atmosphere perfume-laden with the incense from a host of lowly sacrificial altars.

But there are innumerable social strata above the poverty-line in which man's inhumanity to man is constantly and insistently in evidence; and in no place more blatantly so than in a lawyer's office. Against that spirit of tender goodwill which animates the poor, and is to the eternal credit of humanity, must be debited

that other spirit of self-interest and ill-will which likewise plays its part in our civilization. Those who have the least to spare are always the most generous; those who have the most are always the most niggardly and grasping. It was Dickens's salvation that both in the manner of his descent into, and his ascent out of, the ultimate deeps there were qualifying stages. We have seen how that before he entered upon his spell of ignominious servitude in the blacking factory he had already been made free of the meaning of poverty; and now we are to see how, before he entered into full possession of his splendid kingdom, he was again to pass through the ordeal of another kind of purgatory.

He was to rid himself, this time, of any illusions that his near acquaintance with the sweet humanity of the poor had bred about him. He was to study at close quarters some very different phases of the human comedy. He was to discover that all men and women were not inevitably kind, as they may have seemed in the days of his degradation and misery—or even just; that cupidity and spite and envy are factors in the battle for existence almost as potent, and often more successful, than any of the virtues. He was to encounter meanness and trickery, falsehood and cruelty, lust and greed, in their ugliest forms; to watch the working of little minds reaching out slimy tentacles to grasp at paltry prizes of power and wealth; of base motives insinuating themselves tortuously, like the serpent in Eden, into every outwardly fair and goodly aspect of life.

In that passage in *Vanity Fair* describing George Osborne's visit to his father's solicitors, Thackeray gives us a brief glimpse of the average attorney's clerk of that day, and of his real position in the scheme of things, which is characteristically radiant with insight, and expresses, better than any words at the disposal of the present writer could, exactly the attitude of that

essentially mild and obsequious factotum toward the majority of his master's clients. Here is the passage :—

"George meanwhile, with his hat on one side, his elbows squared, and his swaggering martial air, made for Bedford Row, and stalked into the attorney's offices as if he was lord of every pale-faced clerk who was scribbling there. He ordered somebody to inform Mr. Higgs that Captain Osborne was waiting, in a fierce and patronizing way, as if the pékin of an attorney, who had thrice his brains, fifty times his money, and a thousand times his experience, was a wretched underling who should instantly leave all his business in life to attend on the captain's pleasure. He did not see the sneer of contempt which passed all round the room, from the first clerk to the articled gents, from the articled gents to the ragged writers and white-faced runners in clothes too tight for them, as he sate there tapping his boot with his cane, and thinking what a parcel of miserable poor devils these were. The miserable poor devils knew all about his affairs. They talked about them over their pints of beer at their public-houses to other clerks of a night. Ye Gods, what do not attorneys and attorney's clerks know in London? Nothing is hidden from their inquisition, and their familiars mutely rule our city."

And Charles Dickens was one of these.

IV

If there had ever been any tendency in Dickens's nature to associate gentlehood with the class that consists of "gentlemen" and "ladies," his experiences in Mr. Molloy's and Mr. Blackmore's offices must assuredly have dispossessed him of it. One can hardly appreciate at its true value the goodness of the Have-Nots until one has traded in the badness of the Haves. It may be urged that a lawyer's experience is confined

solely to the worst and not necessarily the most typical cases. That notion falls to the ground, however, when one remembers that the whole fabric of the law is built upon the principle of mutual mistrust. Every clause, every article, every stipulation and condition; every enactment, rule, and precedent is drafted and re-drafted and re-drafted again, and rough-copied and fair-copied and fair-copied again, is settled and re-settled and copied and re-copied, and settled and yet again re-settled, and bandied from hand to hand and argued and squabbled and fought over, and finally engrossed and signed and sealed and delivered—in every stage of its progress on the frank assumption that either of the parties concerned is entirely bent on cheating and robbing all or any of the others if it is barely possible for him to do so. The whole practice of the law is an exercise in cunning and chicanery. Truth and honour, good faith and charitableness, mercy and kindness: these are the instincts against which it wages unremitting war. To be generous is to be madly foolish. To be fair-minded is to be quixotic. To forego the seizing of any advantage offered by another's innocence or ignorance or oversight is to write yourself down an ass. To voice scruples against suppressing ugly facts and distorting equivocal circumstances is to forfeit the respect of your legal advisers. To confound law with equity is to amuse them.

Quitting that fetid atmosphere and beholding two men submitting their differences to the arbitrament of the fist is to enjoy a sensation sweet and refreshing as the first cool breath of ocean that bathes the brow of the visitor to a stokehold on regaining the deck.

Dickens's experience of the law was the one thing needed to add to the effect upon his temperament of his other varied experiences, just that salutary touch of hard sophistication which conduces to perfect clearness of vision. Failing it, he might quite conceivably have

fallen upon themes overlaid with a sodden sort of sentimentality and a silly, sickly mawkishness as the most suitable vehicles for the expression of his peculiar genius. His humour that we know as so healthy and robust might have vented itself in such clumsy gambollings and heavily-arch badinage as one finds in the writings of his host of imitators. But from these temptations—though it cannot be said that he never in any sense succumbed to them—he is usually delivered by his practical knowledge of men and affairs, by his unfailing common sense and stability of judgment, his nice appreciation of the mutations of popular taste and opinion, his indomitable instinct for detecting the absurd, the grandiose, and the disproportionate, and by the general heartiness and sanity of his point of view : all qualities likely to be developed in him by his traffic with the law and lawyers.

And it is very possible that Dickens learned all these lessons quite unconsciously and quite without pain—that was to come afterwards, with reflection ; and without any sense of the importance or the magnitude of the facts that he was inspiring through every pore of his skin. Learned them as a boy learns to run and to fight, never realizing the blessedness of his privileges until the power to enjoy them is beginning to wane.

The remainder of that anterior time which preceded Dickens's long tenure of fame may be very briefly disposed of in the following epitomised extracts from the invaluable Forster.

It would not be possible (says he) to have better illustrative comment on all these years than is furnished by his father's reply to a friend it was once hoped to interest on his behalf.

" Pray, Mr. Dickens, where was your son educated ? "

" Why, indeed, sir—ha ! ha !—he may be said to have educated himself."

Of the two kinds of education which Gibbon says that

all men who rise above the common level receive—the first, that of his teachers, and the second, more important and impersonal, his own—Dickens had the full advantage of the latter. And it sufficed.

Very nearly another eighteen months were now to be spent mainly in practical preparation for what he was at this time led finally to choose as an employment from which a fair income was certain, with such talents as he possessed. He suddenly determined to qualify himself thoroughly for what his father was lately become, a newspaper parliamentary reporter. He set resolutely therefore to the study of shorthand; and for the additional help of such general information about books as a fairly educated youth might be expected to have, as well as to satisfy some higher personal cravings, he became an assiduous attendant at the British Museum reading-room. He would frequently refer to these days—mistakenly, in the present writer's opinion—as decidedly the most useful he had ever spent; though perhaps, in some minor respects, they may have been so. No man who knew him in later years and talked to him familiarly of books and things would have suspected the manner of his education in boyhood, almost entirely self-given as it was. The secret consisted in this, that whatever for the time he had to do he lifted himself, there and then, to the level of; and at no time disregarded the rules he elsewhere applied to another. "Whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do well. What I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely. Never to put one hand to anything on which I could throw my whole self, and never to affect depreciation of my work, whatever it was, I find now to have been my golden rules."

Of the difficulties that beset his shorthand studies, as well as of what first turned his mind to them, he has told something in *David Copperfield*. He had heard that many men distinguished in various pursuits had

begun life by reporting debates in Parliament, and he was not deterred by a friend's warning that the mere attainment of a mechanical excellence might take some years to achieve thoroughly, " a perfect and entire command of the mystery of writing and reading shorthand being about equal in difficulty to the mastery of six languages." Undaunted, he plunged into it, self-teaching in this as in graver things, and having bought Mr. Gurney's half-guinea book, worked his way steadily through it.

And even when he had subdued to his will in marvellously quick time this unruly and unaccommodating servant of stenography, what he most desired was still not open to him. He had to pass nearly two years as a reporter for one of the offices in Doctors' Commons, having made attempts even in the direction of the stage to escape such drudgery, before he became a partaker in parliamentary toils and triumphs.

It was in 1831 that his first ambition was at last gratified, and he entered the Gallery of the House; and what he did there, and how he did it, we know sufficiently well already.

PART II

AUTHOR

CHAPTER I

FIRST-FRUITS

I

WE are now upon the threshold of that era of splendid achievement with which Dickens's name is popularly identified. But to deal, within the limits prescribed by the scope of this book, with his life and work as an author is a task fraught with many obvious difficulties.

In the first place it has to be borne in mind that no more of purely literary criticism is permissible than is inseparable from any adequate consideration of his development as a Socialist. A certain amount of purely literary criticism is, nevertheless, indispensable to that purpose. It has to be shown, for instance, that Dickens was an accurate observer; and the faculty of accurate observation depends a good deal, not only on the extent of the observer's knowledge and experience, but also on his wisdom and sympathy. A South Sea Islander, for example, might conceivably be at a loss to understand why the English city man carries an umbrella to protect garments that in themselves seem to be peculiarly unfitted alike to his occupation and the vagarious British climate. The South Sea Islander would need to understand the importance of the top-hat in our social order before he could accept its existence as a necessary evil. So the artist, before he can paint a true picture of life as he sees it, must know

something of its inner hidden meaning, as well as of its outward manifestations.

It has been advanced that Dickens was a realist. Which is to say that he painted pictures, having colour as well as light and shade, rather than that he presented photographs all subdued to one tone. But the meaning of the word Realism has somehow come to be applied nowadays in a stupidly restricted sense. Certain epithets have come to be inevitably associated with it, such, notably, as "grim" and "unpleasant"—as if beauty were less real than ugliness, or goodness than evil.

It is not given to any man to discover everything about anything; but in so far as the truth about certain broad human types is discoverable Dickens may be said to have discovered it. We may quarrel with his point of view; but it is to be remembered that no two men see exactly the same thing from exactly the same standpoint. To declare that Dickens's eyes deceived him is merely to say that he did not see with your own eyes. That he saw eye to eye with the majority—but a little more clearly—is proved by his unbounded popularity. So much, then, for his powers of observation and insight.

But that he had some serious defects of character has already been allowed. And among them may be ranked as one of the most grievous that cowardly quality which is usually esteemed most admirable—to wit, Common Sense, so called. There never was an artist of Dickens's calibre who was less afflicted by those fluctuations of mood that are summed up, in a rather dubious phrase, as the artistic temperament. He was, above all things, a practical man. He was fundamentally worldly-minded. He wrote—as he would have gone on the stage, as he edited a book of trivial memoirs, and as he afterwards gave readings—primarily to make money. His art was, first of all, his

means of livelihood. That he had his chiefest joy in the exercise of his art does not abate that fact. His art constantly overpowered and obsessed his normal judgment, just as his passionate humanity sometimes whelmed his art, because he was a man who exulted in expressing his whole individuality to the utmost, and did not readily subordinate one side of his nature to any other.

It is fairly obvious that he started writing in order, first of all, to supplement his income. He wrote for no pay at first, on the sprat-and-mackerel principle. And when success began to come it was mainly his eagerness to make hay while the sun shone that led him to enter into so many unwise contracts, and so seriously to prejudice the opening of his career. But fairly started as a novelist, and having rid himself of some of his self-imposed handicap, he proved himself exceedingly keen about money. In his later days he went on the lecture platform, inspired solely by desire of gain, and was even ready to sacrifice a good deal of the power that belonged properly to his work—and this in the face of repeated warnings—for just that sake. Throughout his life he never lost sight of the main chance, and always strove in its direction. This is not to say that he was a mere mercenary : indeed we have proof that he was nothing of the kind ; but it is to say that he was above all things a man of affairs, a business man, one who would have held up to derision all modern babble about Art for Art's sake, and refused to believe in the sincerity of any such cult. In his day the doctrine of Self-Help was paramount, and he believed in it. To get on, to make money, to establish an assured position in society—these were ideals that he did not by any means despise—as why should he ? He was a good-natured, kind, and deeply affectionate man, but there was nothing quixotic about him, nothing of the scatter-brain ; in short, he had none of those—failings ?—tendencies, let us say,

that we are mercifully disposed to dub Bohemian. He came as near as any writer to being a living incarnation of that obtrusive, elusive abstraction, The Average Man.

He had the average man's ready appreciation of the humour of eccentricity. Any unusual feature of a person's character, or even of his face or figure, instantly caught his attention and fixed it and held it—as it will that of most crowds. He had the trick of describing a type by means of insisting on some more than usually outstanding personal trait which belongs peculiarly to the average mind. And the temperate sanity of his point of view, the hard clearness of his mental outlook, enabled him to discover oddities of manner and speech in men and women and to make literary capital out of them, where a more subtle artist might have derived only pain or disgust. The charge of exaggeration and caricature that is levelled against Dickens is really a tribute to the judicial temper of his mind, which never failed to fasten on any departure from the normal, and never lost sight of it. He had all the average man's impatience of what he does not understand, together with the good-humoured disdain born of self-complacency that commonly accompanies it and vents itself in vigorous ridicule. He was, in short—when he first turned to writing, anyway—a typical Englishman, with the typically English point of view and the typically English acquiescence in things as they are. Only with years, and very slowly, came his emancipation from this thrall of conventional insularism—an emancipation that was never made quite complete.

II

It is never safe to trust implicitly in the good faith of a literary man when he speaks of the beginnings of his career. Unconsciously, maybe, he misrepresents the facts, the passion for romance often misleading him

in his own despite. Thus there are some who love to make a long serial story of their manifold failures, whilst others claim to have won success almost at a single stroke. In either case one may reasonably discount something, as a rule, of exaggeration from these accounts. So far as we know, Dickens would seem to have had very little difficulty in getting his earliest work published. But it may be that he experienced many disappointments before that glad day came when his first effort appeared in all the glory of print. "On which occasion [he says] I walked down to Westminster Hall, and turned into it for half an hour, because my eyes were so dimmed with joy and pride that they could not bear the street, and were not fit to be seen there." This first effort was "Mr. Minns and His Cousin," to be found in *Sketches by Boz*, his first book.

It was the late James Payn, a most excellent judge of literature, who maintained that a man's first book usually contains some of his finest work, a view in which the present writer concurs. Technically a first book is likely to be the author's worst book, but in the more important matters of sincerity and conviction it is very frequently his best. There is more gusto, more heart, more genuine feeling, more of the real man behind the burning words than is usually to be found in any of his later, more sophisticated productions. Even the youthful affectations of style and sentiment, the occasional outbursts of world-weary cynicism or flamboyant rhodomontade, are only so many extra side-lights on the young author's callow ingenuousness of mind and transparent simplicity of soul. And when the writer finds, as Dickens found, his appointed circle of readers at once, and secures an instant popularity, the first freshness of his work often endures unto the end of his labours. It is the less fortunate man of letters, groping after an acceptable medium in the face of many rebuffs and much neglect, who at last achieves the well-

nigh perfect, coldly chiselled masterpiece which is included in every list of The Hundred Best Books, and bought by the obedient many, and read by the discerning few.

It was Dickens's privilege to hit the public taste at his first essay, and thus to gain that full measure of self-confidence which alone permits of complete self-expression. Thus we find in *Sketches by Boz* the same elements, crudely manifest, that went to the making of his fame in every one of his succeeding books. There is little in the book itself which strikes us as forecasting a great future for its young author . . . apart from its exploitation of comparatively new material. But just precisely here, in its presentment of lower middle-class characters, in its truthful pictures of certain phases of life which had hitherto escaped any serious literary treatment, it makes its distinctive, indelible mark. The humour is often more than a trifle strained where it is not reminiscent of inferior models, such as Robert Smith Surtees; the pathos is often superficial and laboured. There is frequently a cheap theatricality of method apparent in the working-up of its effects, and now and then a positive note of sheer banality, if not vulgarity, is struck. Nevertheless, it justifies James Payn's dictum in that it does contain some of Dickens's most forceful, honest, and sincere work. It reveals a young writer observing and thinking and drawing conclusions for himself. In the matter of courage and independence—that is to say, in its disregard of the literary canons of the time, and in the selection of its themes—it is demonstrably more remarkable than any other of Dickens's books. Indeed, Dickens would seem to have exhausted the greater part of his native stock of audacity in this his immature firstling. Never again—though of course the necessity is never again imposed upon him—does he so boldly challenge current opinion and the national taste as in *Sketches by Boz*.

In that book he dared to take his chance of obloquy and denunciation to an extent that he never afterwards attempted. At first blush it may seem a parlous small risk that he ran; but not if we reflect how the professional critics of every age have resolutely set their faces against the unprecedented thing, have consistently discouraged experiments, and have sought to minimize the value of originality in whatever form it revealed itself by unfairly applying the standards of old worn-out formulas to new fresh methods.

Dickens, in the phrase, broke new ground in *Sketches by Boz*, and the author who does that is far more likely to dig a pitfall for himself than to strike a golden lode. Dickens wrote of low life, low people. That in itself would not have mattered, but he wrote of them with open sympathy and familiar insight, as from their own level, and as if they had been his fellow-mortals instead of ridiculous and offensive inferior animals. Nor did he seem concerned overmuch to dwell on the picturesque side of their poverty, or to depict their squalors and dolours, their follies and their crimes, in lurid terms. He chose rather to select the most commonplace and seemingly uninteresting types, and to dwell on their tawdry social pretensions and aspirations, their elaborate gentilities, their homely joys and sorrows, and the everyday incidents of their dull existence, than on those grosser traits of lewdness and coarseness, of ignorance and stupidity and brutality—chequered by moments of crapulous or lecherous wit—which it was the fashionable literary mode of that time to assume and dilate upon as the most salient characteristics of the lower orders. And this in the teeth of a standing tradition in regard to the poor that had just lately been cemented by Sir Walter Scott in the terribly long series of terribly long novels which, it is said, a number of Englishmen are still buying by the shelf-full, and some Scotsmen claim to have read. It would have been

quite easy for Dickens to have builded on that foundation, too. That he did not, that he breathed the breath of his genius into the nostrils of this despised riff-raff of humanity, who had hitherto served only as comic relief or applauding chorus, or as the ruffianly supernumeraries of tragedy, was infinitely to the credit of his discernment as an artist, and in addition very nicely gauged the temper of his mind also. Whether he knew it or not, he had, by the manner of his first literary onset, at once and irrevocably enrolled himself on the side of the masses.

Indeed, there are parts of *Sketches by Boz* which really stand out far in advance of much of the work that Dickens did immediately afterwards—notably in the vital particulars of outspokenness and plain dealing. There is less of deference to popular opinion in this book, less delicacy about offending certain mawkish susceptibilities, and more fearlessness and thoroughness and integrity of aim. The splendid insouciance of youth betrays the author into excesses of intrepid self-expression that he was afterwards disposed to guard against when such ebullitions threatened to spoil his market. But in *Sketches by Boz* one seems to catch glimpses, here and there, of the flushed face of the ardent, eager boy blazing behind the fervid phrases that he dashes off with a red-hot pen, outrunning discretion, and stabs into the fair white paper as if it were the innocent heart of his reader.

To say that there are many faults in *Sketches by Boz* is merely to re-state that it was a first book. The flights of bombast; the hoity-toity fine writing and somewhat blotchy purple patches; the occasional strivings after a brilliant levity that never properly belonged to Dickens's art; the wild indiscriminate satire that vents itself in empty sneers and shrill scoldings where it would sear and scathe with caustic irony; these blemishes, scattered about the pages of the *Sketches*,

are only such as one naturally expects to find in any promising author's firstling. But there are some rather graver faults. There are passages that hint at a distressing tendency toward mental equivocation, passages in which Dickens juggles with what are obviously his real earnest convictions, and even lapses upon a slightly supercilious tone, apes a jejune superiority, and goes out of his way to attack with almost savage scorn and contempt certain matters that he had wilfully set his face against, and having adopted that attitude of blind intolerance would not even take the trouble to try to understand.

This youthful arrogance is occasionally amusing, as, for instance, when Dickens falls foul of the small venial poses and affectations of enthusiastic votaries of art and literature and æsthetics generally. But it is amusing in a different way from that intended. It fails of its effect by reason of the clumsiness of its method. The puppets upon whom the harmless little mannerisms are grafted are usually so grossly inappropriate to the fiery young satirist's purpose that they embody no recognizable type, and consequently their exposure at the hands of the contumelious Charles cannot possibly arride anybody's sensibilities. Thus a most unconvincingly inoffensive Irishman, O'Bleary, is described as "reading *Horace*, and trying to look as if he understood it"—as if Horace were not one of the easiest of writers to understand! Again, a foolish young gentleman named Mr. Hicks, who spouts poetry, is asked, after delivering one of his quotations:

"'Is that from Milton?'

"'No—from Byron,' returns Mr. Hicks with a look of contempt." And Dickens adds, with terrible severity: "He was quite sure of his author, because he never read any other"—which, to say the least, is a condition of mind hard to realize.

Further on Mr. Hicks is at it again.

"Between the fish and an intimated sirloin there was a prolonged interval. Here was an opportunity for Mr. Hicks. He could not resist the singularly appropriate quotation :—

> "'But beef is rare within these oxless isles;
> Goat's flesh there is, no doubt, and kid and mutton,
> And, when a holiday upon them smiles,
> A joint upon their barbarous spits they put on.'

"'Very ungentlemanly behaviour,' thought little Mrs. Tibbs, 'to talk in that way.'

"'Ah!' said Mr. Calton, filling his glass, 'Tom Moore is my poet.'

"'And mine,' said Mrs. Maplesone.

"'And mine,' said Miss Julia.

"'And mine,' added Mr. Simpson.

"'Look at his compositions,' resumed the knocker.

"'To be sure,' said Simpson, with confidence.

"'Look at "Don Juan,"' replied Mr. Septimus Hicks.

"'Julia's letter,' suggested Miss Matilda.

"'Can anything be grander than "The Fire Worshippers"?' inquired Miss Julia.

"'To be sure,' said Simpson.

"'Or "Paradise and the Peri"?' said the old beau.

"'Yes, or "Paradise and the Peer"?' repeated Simpson, who thought he was getting through it capitally.

"'It's all very well,' replied Mr. Septimus Hicks, who, as we have before hinted, never had read anything but 'Don Juan' . . ."

And so on. Impostors all! Poor hapless Hicks being now reduced from his former pitiable state of knowing only one author to the worse condition of having read only one of that author's productions. And then there is another unfortunate one, Tomkins, whose treatment is especially harsh.

"'God bless me!' exclaimed Tomkins, who had been

looking out of the window. 'Here—Wisbottle—pray come here—make haste!'

"Mr. Wisbottle started from the table, and every one looked up.

"'Do you see,' said the connoisseur, placing Wisbottle in the right position—'a little more this way: there—do you see how splendidly the light falls upon the left side of that broken chimney-pot at No. 48?'

"'Dear me! I see,' replied Wisbottle, in a tone of admiration.

"'I never saw an object stand out so beautifully against the clear sky in my life,' ejaculated Alfred. Everybody . . . echoed the sentiment; for Mr. Tomkins had a great character for finding out beauties which no one else could discover—he certainly deserved it."

As has been said, this is amusing enough in its unintentional way. And it might also be considered exceedingly trivial if the same fault were not apparent in Dickens's handling of vastly more serious concerns, not only in *Sketches by Boz*, but throughout a whole cycle of his books. Thus, in this same sketch, "The Boarding-House," we have set down a morsel of dialogue in which a Mr. Evenson, dubbed "Radical" by the author, mixes up some sound Socialism with his other talk, and is held up to ridicule and contempt on that account, not, we suspect, because Dickens is at odds with the sentiments he expresses, but because these sentiments were the common scoff thenadays, as now, and afforded the usual smart young pressman the usual cheap opportunity of indulging in a facile gibe. The conversation turns on a Court drawing-room.

"'The Dowager Marchioness of Publiccash,' said the aristocratic Wisbottle, 'was most magnificently dressed, and so was the Baron Slappenbachenhausen.'

"'What was he presented on?' inquired Evenson.

"'On his arrival in England.'

"'I thought so,' growled the radical; 'you never hear of these fellows being presented on their going away again. They know better than that. . . .'

"'Well,' said Wisbottle, evading the point, 'it's a splendid sight.'

"'And did it never occur to you,' inquired the radical, who never would be quiet, 'did it never occur to you that you pay for these precious ornaments of society?'

"'It certainly *has* occurred to me,' said Wisbottle, who thought this answer was a poser; 'it *has* occurred to me, and I am willing to pay for them.'

"'Well, and it has occurred to me, too,' replied John Evenson, 'and I ain't willing to pay for 'em. Then why should I?—I say, why should I?' continued the politician. . . . 'There are two great principles—demand——'

"'A cup of tea, if you please, dear,' interrupted Tibbs.

"'And supply——'

"'May I trouble you to hand this tea to Mr. Tibbs?' said Mrs. Tibbs, interrupting the argument and unconsciously illustrating it. The thread of the orator's discourse was broken. . . ."

Again, in the "Parlour Orator," this same inherent craven timidity of judgment leads Dickens into even worse error, and impels him to treat with a perverse flippancy sentiments with which there is every reason to believe he felt considerable sympathy. We are introduced to the smoky, beery atmosphere of a dirty bar-parlour and bidden to listen to the sayings of a drink-sodden, "red-faced man," whom Dickens would have us believe is a typical demagogue of that period. Here are some excerpts from his utterances.

"'We stand in these times upon a calm elevation of intellectual attainment, and not in the dark recess of mental deprivation. Proof is what I require—proof, and not assertions, in these stirring times. Every

gen'lem'n that knows me, knows what was the nature and effect of my observations, when it was in the contemplation of the Old Street Suburban Representative Discovery Society to recommend a candidate for that place in Cornwall. . . . "Mr. Snobee," said Mr. Wilson, "is a fit and proper person to represent the borough in Parliament." "Prove it," says I. "He is a friend to Reform," says Mr. Wilson. "Prove it," says I. . . . "His acts prove it," says he. "Prove *them*," says I.' . . . And the red-faced man, having struck the table very hard with his clenched fist, to add weight to the declaration, smoked away like a brewery. . . .

"'. . . When I came into this parish, and first used this room, ten years ago, I don't believe there was one man in it who knew he was a slave—and now you all know it, and writhe under it. Inscribe that upon my tomb, and I am satisfied.' 'Why, as to inscribing it on your tomb,' said a little greengrocer, with a chubby face, 'of course you can have anything chalked up as you likes to pay for, so far as it relates to yourself and your affairs; but when you come to talk about slaves and that there abuse, you'd better keep it in the family, 'cos I for one don't like to be called them names, night after night.' 'You *are* a slave,' said the red-faced man, 'and the most pitiable of all slaves.' 'Wery hard if I am,' interrupted the greengrocer, 'for I got no good out of the twenty million that was paid for 'mancipation, anyhow.' 'A willing slave,' ejaculated the red-faced man, getting more red with eloquence and contradiction—'resigning the dearest birthright of your children—neglecting the sacred call of Liberty—who, standing imploringly before you, appeals to the warmest feelings of your heart, and points to your helpless infants, but in vain.' 'Prove it,' said the greengrocer. 'Prove it!' sneered the man with the red face. 'What! bending beneath the yoke of an insolent and factious oligarchy; bowed down by the domination of cruel laws; groan-

ing beneath tyranny and oppression on every hand, at every side, and in every corner. Prove it ?' The red-faced man abruptly broke off, sneered melodramatically, and buried his countenance and his indignation together in a quart pot."

Yet it really does seem as if the red-faced man, stripped of his absurdities, had somehow contrived to lay hold on the root of the matter. And it may be hastily assumed that Dickens did not intend to make an abject mock of him, after all. But, unmistakably, he did, for he concludes his article in these words :

" A numerous race are these red-faced men ; there is not a parlour, or club-room, or benefit society, or humble party of any kind, without its red-faced man. Weak-pated dolts they are, and a great deal of mischief they do to their cause, however good. So, just to hold a pattern one up to know the others by, we took his likeness at once, and put him in here. And that is the reason why we have written this paper."

Now to hark back a little, and to show that there is sufficient reason for believing that Dickens had a secret sympathy with both Mr. Evenson's and the red-faced man's views, unbecomingly as he sets them forth and garnishes them. In numberless passages in *Sketches by Boz* shall we find support of this belief : in the passage, for instance, to make an easy selection, with which the volume opens, and with which this chapter must close—a passage whose purpose it would be impossible to mistake and hard to express more powerfully or fittingly.

" How much is conveyed in these two short words—'The Parish.' And with how many tales of distress and misery, of broken fortune and ruined hopes, too often of unrelieved wretchedness and successful knavery, are they associated ! A poor man, with small earnings and a large family, just manages to live on from hand to mouth, and to procure food from day to day ; he has

barely sufficient to satisfy the present cravings of nature, and can take no heed of the future. His taxes are in arrear, quarter-day passes by, another quarter-day arrives; he can procure no more quarter for himself, and is summoned by—the parish. His goods are distrained, his children are crying with cold and hunger; and the very bed on which his sick wife is lying is dragged from beneath her. What can he do? To whom is he to apply for relief? To private charity? To benevolent individuals? Certainly not—there is his parish. There are the parish vestry, the parish infirmary, the parish beadle. Excellent institutions, and gentle, kind-hearted man. The woman dies—she is buried by the parish. The children have no protector—they are taken care of by the parish. The man first neglects, and afterwards cannot obtain, work—he is relieved by the parish; and when distress and drunkenness have done their work upon him, he is maintained, a harmless, babbling idiot, in the parish asylum."

CHAPTER II

"PICKWICK PAPERS"

I

HOLDING steadily in view the end to which these labours are directed, it is not easy to assign to *Pickwick Papers* its proper place in this review of Dickens's work.

In many respects it is the greatest of all Dickens's books. No list of notable novels, however headed, could be complete that omitted it. Accepting this, the present writer is, nevertheless, forced to make the lamentable confession that it is the one work of Dickens that yields him least pleasure in the reading, the one that leaves him coldest, that he soonest grows tired of. He appreciates fully that it is a quite unique masterpiece: unique if only in its blending together of the finest qualities of both the picaresque romance and the novel of manners. He appreciates, too, the unexampled high spirits that irradiate its pages; its inexhaustible vivacity and stupendous comic force; its nimble wit and inimitable drollery; its prodigality of invention in incident and character; and, above all, its fidelity to truth, which makes it perhaps the best mirror of an age—an era—extant in any language, and whose value, to history alone, is incalculable. In its portrayal of the manners and customs, the speech and opinions and everyday doings of the period and the people with which it deals, it is beyond question or

cavil one of the most remarkable achievements in English literature.

All this may readily be granted, and yet remains a reservation of abiding dissatisfaction with the total effect produced by the whole work on one mind at least. Possibly, if another than Dickens had written *Pickwick Papers*, its almost entire lack of spirituality, of idealism; its flippant, light-hearted disregard of vital issues; the blatant objectivity of its treatment, and the gay, cynical carelessness of its pervading tone, would not become at last rather insistently irritating, and even a trifle wearisome. But the present writer, having been steeped in Dickens from the days when he read his books with his finger marking the place, is unable to dissociate the author of *Pickwick Papers* from the author of such tender, noble, and wise books as—say—*Great Expectations;* and that hampers him a good deal by making him feel that the *Papers* is an unworthy work, almost a prostitution of the powers latent even in the immediately preceding *Sketches*.

Yet undoubtedly *Pickwick Papers* is, if not the most popular of all Dickens's books, certainly the one with which his name and fame are most widely identified, and as such it must of course count enormously in any attempt at any sort of an estimate of his work. Perhaps its function in this necessarily restricted monograph may be best displayed in a consideration of its development from an irresponsible and more or less disconnected collection of humorous episodes to an ordered and instructive study of typical English scenes and types. This gradual expansion of his first scheme Dickens himself recognizes and defends in his Preface.

"It has been observed of Mr. Pickwick" (he says) "that there is a decided change in his character, as these pages proceed, and that he becomes more good and more sensible. I do not think that this change will appear forced or unnatural to my readers, if they will

reflect that in real life the peculiarities and oddities of a man who has anything whimsical about him generally impress us first, and that it is not until we are better acquainted with him that we usually begin to look below these superficial traits, and to know the better part of him."

All of which is true enough, and yet seems to savour a little of sophistry, too, since one shrewdly suspects that Dickens originally projected Mr. Pickwick as a purely farcical character and nothing more—a mere figure of fun. And this provides just one of the first of many similar instances, already alluded to, in which Dickens's art first breaks down the limits that he himself had designed to impose upon it, and then is in turn overwhelmed and glorified by the triumphant might of his indomitable humanism. He cannot suffer the thought that Mr. Pickwick should go down to final judgment as a mere butt of ridicule ; he is not content that Sam Weller should remain no more than a stalking-horse for his author's wit to the end of the chapter. So he pilots us into the horrible Fleet Prison, and thus seizes an opportunity to exploit still further his heritage of genius in new and more poignant directions. In the words of his biographer, expressed with some of the warm partiality and extravagance of the confirmed hero-worshipper and friend, maybe, but true enough :—

"He had as yet done nothing so remarkable, in blending humour with tragedy, as his picture of what the poor side of a debtors' prison was in the days of which we have seen that he had himself had bitter experience ; and we have but to recall, as it rises sharply to the memory, what is contained in this portion of a work that was not only among his earliest but his least considered as to plan, to understand what it was that not alone had given him his fame so early, but which in itself held the germ of the future that awaited him. Every point was a telling one, and the truthfulness of

the whole unerring. The dreadful restlessness of the place, undefined yet unceasing, unsatisfying and terrible, was pictured throughout with De Foe's minute reality; while points of character were handled in that greater style which connects with the richest oddities of humour an insight into principles of character universal as nature itself. When he resolved that Sam Weller should be occupant of the prison with Mr. Pickwick, he was perhaps thinking of his favourite Smollett, and how, when Peregrine Pickle was inmate of the Fleet, Hatchway and Pipes refused to leave him; but Fielding himself might have envied his way of setting about it. Nor is any portion of his picture less admirable than this. The comedy gradually deepening into tragedy; the shabby vagabonds who are the growth of debtors' prisons, contrasting with the poor simple creatures who are their sacrifices and victims; Mr. Mivins and Mr. Smangle side by side with the cobbler ruined by his legacy who sleeps under the table to remind himself of his old four-poster; Mr. Pickwick's first night in the marshal's room, Sam Weller entertaining Stiggins in the snuggery, Jingle in decline, and the chancery prisoner dying; in all these scenes there was writing of the first order, a deep feeling of character, that delicate form of humour which has a quaintly pathetic turn in it as well, comedy of the richest and broadest kind, and the easy handling throughout of a master in his art. We place the picture by the side of those of the great writers of this style of fiction in our language, and it does not fall by the comparison."

II

But the following extracts from *Pickwick Papers* itself will convey a better impression than any commentary could of the awakening of Dickens's mind to a sense of its ultimate responsibilities under the clamant demands of his art for fuller expression.

"It was getting dark; that is to say, a few gas-jets were kindled in this place which was never light, by way of compliment to the evening, which had set in outside. As it was rather warm, some of the tenants of the numerous little rooms which opened into the gallery on either hand had set their doors ajar. Mr. Pickwick peeped into them as he passed along, with great curiosity and interest. Here four or five great hulking fellows, just visible through a cloud of tobacco-smoke, were engaged in noisy and riotous conversation over half-emptied pots of beer, or playing all-fours with a very greasy pack of cards. In the adjoining room some solitary tenant might be seen, poring, by the light of a feeble tallow candle, over a bundle of soiled and tattered papers, yellow with dust and dropping to pieces from age: writing, for the hundredth time, some lengthened statement of his grievances, for the perusal of some great man whose eyes it would never reach, or whose heart it would never touch. In a third, a man, with his wife and a whole crowd of children, might be seen making up a scanty bed on the ground, or upon a few chairs, for the younger ones to pass the night in. And in a fourth, and a fifth, and a sixth, and a seventh, the noise, and the beer, and the tobacco-smoke, and the cards, all came over again in a greater force than before.

"In the galleries themselves, and more especially on the staircases, there lingered a great number of people, who came there, some because their rooms were empty and lonesome, others because their rooms were full and hot; the greater part because they were restless and uncomfortable, and not possessed of the secret of exactly knowing what to do with themselves. There were many classes of people here, from the labouring-man in his fustian jacket, to the broken-down spend-thrift in his shawl dressing-gown, most appropriately out at elbows; but there was the same air about them all—a listless jail-bird careless swagger, a vagabondish

who's afraid sort of bearing, which is wholly indescribable in words, but which any man can understand in one moment if he wish, by setting foot in the nearest debtors' prison, and looking at the very first group of people he sees there, with the same interest as Mr. Pickwick did.

"'It strikes me, Sam,' said Mr. Pickwick, leaning over the iron rail at the stair-head, 'it strikes me, Sam, that imprisonment for debt is scarcely any punishment at all.'

"'Think not, sir?' inquired Mr. Weller.

"'You see how these fellows drink, and smoke, and roar,' replied Mr. Pickwick. 'It's quite impossible that they can mind it much.'

"'Ah, that's just the wery thing, sir,' rejoined Sam; '*they* don't mind it; it's a regular holiday to them—all porter and skittles. It's the t'other vuns as gets done over, with this sort of thing: them broken-hearted fellers as can't svig away at the beer, nor play at skittles, neither; them as vould pay if they could, and gets low by being boxed up. I'll tell you wot it is, sir; them as is always a idlin' in public-houses it don't damage at all, and them as is always a workin' wen they can, it damages too much. "It's unekal," as my father used to say wen his grog worn't made half-and-half. "It's unekal, and that's the fault on it."'"

"'I think you're right, Sam,' said Mr. Pickwick, after a few moments' reflection, 'quite right.'"

To the present writer this passage seems one of the most illuminative in any of Dickens's earlier works. It reveals the mind not only of the observer, the humorist, the novelist, and the born student of mankind, but also the mind of a thinker and a philosopher, of a big-brained, big-hearted man, who brought to bear on every aspect of life that came under his searching purview a quick and keen insight into its underlying

mysteries, and a sympathetic knowledge of their meaning, which at once seized on its veiled significance and interpreted its message to the world with a perfect sense of its universal application as a solvent of innumerable intricate problems—ethical, economic, or merely political.

Here is another picture from the same gallery, also with its plain lesson, shrewdly conned and taken to heart. One can almost see the unfolding of the young author's mind as his imagination limns more and more plainly before the startled vision of his brain the pregnant issues upon which his intellect has lighted, almost unwittingly.

"There is no disguising the fact that Mr. Pickwick felt very low-spirited and uncomfortable; not for lack of society, for the prison was very full, and a bottle of wine would at once have purchased the utmost good-fellowship of a few choice spirits, without any more formal ceremony of introduction; but he was alone in the coarse, vulgar crowd, and felt the depression of spirit and sinking of heart naturally consequent on the reflection that he was cooped and caged up, without a prospect of liberation. . . .

"In this frame of mind he turned again into the coffee-room gallery, and walked slowly to and fro. The place was intolerably dirty, and the smell of tobacco-smoke perfectly suffocating. There was a perpetual slamming and banging of doors as the people went in and out; and the noise of their voices and footsteps echoed and re-echoed through the passages constantly. A young woman, with a child in her arms, who seemed scarcely able to crawl, from emaciation and misery, was walking up and down the passage, in conversation with her husband, who had no other place to see her in. As they passed Mr. Pickwick, he could hear the female sob; and once she burst into such a passion of grief that she was compelled to lean against the wall for support, while

the man took the child in his arms, and tried to soothe her.

"Mr. Pickwick's heart was really too full to bear it, and he went upstairs to bed.

"Now, although the warden's room was a very uncomfortable one (being, in every point of decoration and convenience, several hundred degrees inferior to the common infirmary of a county gaol), it had at present the merit of being wholly deserted, save by Mr. Pickwick himself. So he sat down at the foot of his little iron bedstead, and began to wonder how much a year the wardens made out of the dirty room. Having satisfied himself, by mathematical calculation, that the apartment was almost equal in annual value to the freehold of a small street in the suburbs of London, he took to wondering what possible temptation could have induced a dingy-looking fly that was crawling over his pantaloons, to come into a close prison, when he had the choice of so many airy situations—a course of meditation which led him to the irresistible conclusion that the insect was mad."

But to multiply such instances, and to dilute their essence by insisting unduly on their relevance to the purpose of this book, would be merely fatuous and a waste of time; nor would it be flattering to the reader's intelligence.

III

Reverting now to Dickens's preface to the collected *Papers*.

"I have found it curious and interesting" (he says), "looking over the sheets of this reprint, to mark what important social improvements have taken place about us, almost imperceptibly, since they were originally written. The licence of counsel, and the degree to which juries are ingeniously bewildered, are yet susceptible of moderation; while an improvement in the

mode of conducting parliamentary elections (and even Parliaments too, perhaps) is still within the bounds of possibility. But legal reforms have pared the claws of Messrs. Dodson and Fogg; a spirit of self-respect, mutual forbearance, education, and co-operation for such good ends has diffused itself among their clerks; places far apart are brought together, to the present convenience and advantage of the public, and to the certain destruction, in time, of a host of petty jealousies, blindnesses, and prejudices by which the public alone have always been the sufferers; the laws relating to imprisonment for debt are altered; and the Fleet Prison is pulled down!

"Who knows, but by the time the series reaches its conclusion, it may be discovered that there are even magistrates in town and country, who should be taught to shake hands every day with common sense and justice; that even Poor Laws may have mercy on the weak, the aged, and unfortunate; that schools, on the broad principles of Christianity, are the best adornment for the length and breadth of this civilized land; that prison-doors should be barred on the outside, no less heavily and carefully than they are barred within; that the universal diffusion of common means of decency and health is as much the right of the poorest of the poor as it is indispensable to the safety of the rich and of the State; that a few petty boards and bodies —less than drops in the great ocean of humanity, which roars around them—are not for ever to let loose fever and consumption on God's creatures at their will, or always to keep their jobbing little fiddles going, for a Dance of Death."

Herein is shown, clearly and surely enough, the zeal of the sanguine young reformer, who has as yet shed nothing of his enthusiasm or his optimism. The changes that have come to pass in legal and parliamentary procedure; the improvement in means of intercom-

munication and friendly traffic and in the conduct of the prisons, during the decade or so that has elapsed since *Pickwick Papers* was first published; and in which, no doubt, the book itself has played its part of a most potent influence—these are so far away, so remote from the modern concerns of Socialism, that our interest in them can hardly be more than reflectively academic; we can only exult in the distance of the journey accomplished. The point is, however, that Dickens's strictures upon these iniquities and infamies were proved to have been timely and well-founded, and thus his exposure of these evils must have helped considerably to bring about their abolition or amelioration. Already, then, he was doing the pioneer work of Socialism by clearing and levelling the cluttered ground in readiness for the laying of a surer foundation for a better superstructure of governance; that weary, dreary work which wastes so much precious time, even now, delaying the fruition of our hopes and longings; but which could still be done so much more easily and gaily and effectively if we had only some indomitable champions of the Dickens type to help us blow away all the litter and the filth and the rubbish with gusts of hearty, healthy mirth. For who shall calculate at all exactly the value of humour to a cause? We know that when we have made the crowd laugh at an opponent we have very likely only turned him into an avowed enemy, though he may have been friendly enough before and only indifferent or ignorant. We know that when we have held up his cherished opinions to the crowd's ridicule our victory is still dubious and necessarily incomplete. But when we have made our enemy laugh at himself, then we have destroyed him utterly and created a friend in his place; since no man can any longer feel wicked or unkind when once his risibilities are tickled. And this is what Dickens could do; what he, though dead in the flesh, is still doing.

And on its graver side, also, how this extract from the Preface to *Pickwick Papers* voices the very soul of Socialism. The book itself may be largely the idle production of a gifted, youthful mind; vibrant with genius, if you like; scintillant with actuality; palpitant with the breath of joy; vivid with radiant truth; but still, essentially, no more than an entertainment, a feast of fun for a holiday mood, mildly seasoned with a tonic bitterness. Yet when the author has laid down his pen at last, his task done, and the work itself has faded into a grey memory of the golden years of his bourgeoning manhood, we see how, in reviewing it, he plucks its ulterior meaning out of the mists of youthful illusion that hung about him as he wrote it, and holds up the bright moral for all to see as he himself now sees it for the first time. In the passionate spirit that animates this glowing peroration to the Preface we recognize the spirit of democracy that deplores stupid misunderstanding and evil thinking between class and class; that would weld into one harmonious whole all the many and diverse elements which go to make up the sum of humanity; that would strip away from the bodies of the nations all those evil growths of foul use and corrupt practice with which they are so thickly overlaid; that yearns to behold the people united by indissoluble bonds of love and goodwill into one great commonwealth of brotherhood and peace.

CHAPTER III

"OLIVER TWIST"

I

IN this book, the first of Dickens's novels to be in any sense deliberately planned and coherently constructed, we come to the consideration of what is known in critical circles as a new departure. A fairly adequate exposition of the scope and aim of *Oliver Twist* is set forth as follows in the Preface; from which, and from other prefaces, no apology is made for making rather frequent extracts, the preface being the proper place in which the purpose of a work of art should be expounded; and, as such, a legitimate source of reference in a review of this kind.

"Once upon a time it was held to be a coarse and shocking circumstance, that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded of London's population.

"As I saw no reason, when I wrote this book, why the dregs of life (so long as their speech did not offend the ear) should not serve the purpose of a moral, as well as its froth of cream, I made bold to believe that this same once upon a time would not prove to be All-time or even a long time. I saw many strong reasons for pursuing my course. I had read of thieves by scores; seductive fellows (amiable for the most part), faultless in dress, plump in pocket, choice in horse-flesh, bold in bearing, fortunate in gallantry, great at a song, a

bottle, pack of cards or dice-box, and fit companions for the bravest. But I had never met (except in Hogarth) with the miserable reality. It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really did exist; to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid misery of their lives; to show them as they really were, for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great black ghastly gallows closing up their prospect, turn they where they might; it appeared to me that to do this, would be to attempt a something which was needed, and which would be a service to society. And I did it as I best could.

"In every book I know, where such characters are treated of, allurements and fascinations are thrown around them. Even in *The Beggar's Opera*, the thieves are represented as leading a life which is rather to be envied than otherwise; while Macheath, with all the captivations of command, and the devotion of the most beautiful girl and only pure character in the piece, is as much to be admired and emulated by weak beholders as any fine gentleman in a red coat who has purchased, as Voltaire says, the right to command a couple of thousand men, and so affront death at their head. Johnson's question, whether any man will turn thief because Macheath is reprieved, seems to me beside the matter. I ask myself whether any man will be deterred from turning thief, because of Macheath's being sentenced to death, and because of the existence of Peachum and Lockit; and remembering the Captain's roaring life, great appearance, vast success, and strong advantages, I feel sure that nobody having a bent that way will take any warning from him, or will see anything in the play but a flowery and pleasant road, conducting an honourable ambition—in course of time—to Tyburn Tree.

"In fact, Gay's witty satire on society had a general

object, which made him quite regardless of example in this respect, and gave him other and wider aims. The same may be said of Sir Edward Bulwer's admirable and powerful novel of *Paul Clifford*, which cannot be fairly considered as having, or as being intended to have, any bearing on this part of the subject, one way or other.

"What manner of life is that which is described in these pages, as the everyday existence of a thief? What charms has it for the young and ill-disposed, what allurements for the most jolter-headed of juveniles? Here are no canterings on moonlit heaths, no merry-makings in the snuggest of all possible caverns, none of the attractions of dress, no embroidery, no lace, no jack-boots, no crimson coat and ruffles, none of the dash and freedom with which 'the road' has been time out of mind invested. The cold wet shelterless midnight streets of London; the foul and frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease; the shabby rags that scarcely hold together; where are the attractions of these things?

"There are people, however, of so refined and delicate a nature, that they cannot bear the contemplation of such horrors. Not that they turn instinctively from crime; but that criminal characters, to suit them, must be, like their meat, in delicate disguise. A Massaroni in green velvet is an enchanting creature; but a Sikes in fustian is insupportable. A Mrs. Massaroni, being a lady in short petticoats and a fancy dress, is a thing to imitate in tableaux and have in lithograph on pretty songs; but a Nancy, being a creature in a cotton gown and cheap shawl, is not to be thought of. It is wonderful how Virtue turns from dirty stockings; and how Vice, married to ribbons and a little gay attire, changes her name, as wedded ladies do, and becomes Romance.

"But as the stern truth, even in the dress of this (in novels) much-exalted race, was a part of the purpose of this book, I did not, for these readers, abate one hole in the Dodger's coat, or one scrap of curl-paper in Nancy's dishevelled hair. I had no faith in the delicacy which could not bear to look upon them. I had no desire to make proselytes among such people. I had no respect for their opinion, good or bad; did not covet their approval; and did not write for their amusement."

So much, then, for the supersensitive and the dilettanti. Allusion has previously been made to the courage and independence Dickens showed in breaking new ground in *Sketches by Boz*, and it was then stated that he seemed to have exhausted the greater part of his native stock of audacity in that effort, and that never again was the same necessity imposed upon him to anything like the same extent. By this was meant that when he first asserted himself as an outspoken, plain-dealing sort of author he did run some risk of offending popular taste; and that, the risk having been averted and his popularity assured, he could in future pretty confidently allow to his art a still wider latitude in its range of themes, and his manner of treating them. He had been in some sort a law unto himself. And thus it does seem that his loftily scornful attitude toward a largely visionary set of readers may be dismissed as so much innocent bombast. There is indeed some passing mention, by Forster, of certain attacks on the subject of *Oliver Twist;* but that these were inconsiderable and rather helped than hindered the book's success is made quite plain in the following passage from the *Life* itself:—

"As each number appeared, his readers generally became more and more conscious of what already, as we have seen, had revealed itself amid even the riotous fun of *Pickwick*, that the purpose was not solely to amuse;

and, far more decisively than its predecessor, the new story further showed what were not the least potent elements in the still increasing popularity that was gathering around the writer. His qualities could be appreciated as well as felt in an almost equal degree by all classes of his various readers. Thousands were attracted to him because he placed them in the midst of scenes and characters with which they were themselves already acquainted; and thousands were reading him with no less avidity because he introduced them to passages of nature and life of which they before knew nothing, but of the truth of which their own habits and senses sufficed to assure them."

But the fact that Dickens did not injure himself in any ponderable degree by his display of hardihood and unconventionality does not detract from the merit of his performance. He was no doubt well advised to advance boldly along the road that he had tentatively set a foot upon in *Sketches by Boz;* at the same time it is to his credit that he did so, and—more important still—it helped yet further to set him right on the highway to Socialism. Before that aspect of his evolution can be properly brought forward, however, there is something left to say of his progress and fresh development as an observer of life in the large, and as a creator of immortal English types.

II

Oliver Twist really inaugurated this last phase of Dickens's genius.

The type that he created in Sam Weller still endures among the Cockney drivers of the various more old-fashionable London conveyances; but the vogue of Wellerisms is spent and past, and the figure of Mr. Pickwick's body-servant is no longer to be found in our national portrait gallery. Oliver Twist also, when he

asked for more, provided the English-speaking world with a catch-phrase for which it still finds use, but Oliver himself is another figure whose reality is blurred and dimmed to modern eyes. But in Bumble and in Bill Sikes Dickens did create two types that are still recognizably as forcible and full of meaning as ever they were. In this respect, then—that is to say, in its presentment of at least two immortal and unmistakable types—*Oliver Twist* must be ranked as among the first of Dickens's books to seize on the popular imagination of the whole British race. And this involves upon the present writer an obligation which (it seems to him) may most conveniently be discharged in this place.

Reams of depreciative criticism have been written on the subject of Dickens's proneness to exaggeration and caricature; and though at first sight it may not seem that the truth or falsehood of this accusation against him very greatly affects the question whether or not he was a Socialist, I think it will be found on investigation that it is a point which does matter very considerably in that particular connection. Because: if Dickens were not an accurate observer, if he consistently took a jaundiced view of life, and invested the figments of his fancy with only a galvanic, spasmodic mock-reality, tricking them out with habits woven of moonshine, and displaying them in the light that never was on land or sea, then it must be conceded that his whole philosophy was likely to be entirely fallacious and untrustworthy. The man with the mental squint sees nothing aright, but regards all things through the same distorting medium. If Dickens were incapable of drawing a human character faithfully and truly, then it is conceivable that he was incapable of drawing a logical conclusion from facts. The power of accurate observation depends as much on understanding and sympathy as on clearness of vision; this, like most true things, has been said before.

A few of the more usual of the objections to Dickens's literary methods may be quite summarily disposed of by anyone intimately acquainted, as the present writer claims to be, with the life of the denizens of those lower social strata from which his books derived their best inspiration. There is, for example, the common objection that Cockneys—to quote a trivial instance—never did misplace their "v's" and "w's." Well, they not only did, but they do. Pick you out any born Cockney of fifty years old, and ask him which he would rather have: A *crême de menthe* and a *pâté de foie gras* or a glass of bitter and a sandwich; and he, misliking the names of those foreign kickshaws, will reply: "Thankin' you all the same, sir, I'll have the beer, if you don't mind, an' a *san'vidge*." An ounce of demonstration is worth a ton of argument; but it may be added that many middle-aged Cockneys to this day say "wery" for "very" and "vell" for "well." The point is a small one, perhaps; but it is small points that stick in best.

What is not fully recognized nowadays is that those were extravagant times in which Dickens's youth was passed. Dress, deportment, speech, and manners were all alike of an inflated quality and a pronounced pattern, highly ludicrous to our modern senses. There were dandies in those days of a dandiacal magnitude that no modern fashions can hope to compass. There were excesses of all kinds; men drank and otherwise dissipated themselves on a Rabelaisian scale of prodigality; prize-fighting was the sport, if not of kings, at least of one Prince of Wales, and the House of Commons adjourned for the day when important encounters took place; men and women betted and gambled away all that they had, and often their honour and sometimes their lives besides, at a single sitting; there were Mohocks, and duels; black slaves were bought and sold by means of newspaper advertisements; there were

smugglers and wreckers and pirates and slavers and press-gangs; men rowed races and played cricket in top-hats of heavy beaver; the whole life of the time was keyed up to a shrill pitch of artificiality and affectation. And the limitations set upon average knowledge and experience were narrow almost beyond present-day belief. London was as remote from Edinburgh then as Liverpool is from New York now. The western Welsh were an undiscovered race of aliens more foreign than the Japanese seem to us to-day. What is lost sight of by depreciators of Dickens is the immensity of the gulf that stretches between the beginning of his time and ours. The English proletarian of the eleventh century was infinitely more akin to the proletarian of the early nineteenth century than the early nineteenth is to the early twentieth. And lest this defence of Dickens may read rather like what lawyers call a Judgment by Default, let it be borne in mind that there is the verdict of his contemporaries to support it. They did not cry out against his descriptions of everyday scenes and people as monstrous perversions; they accepted them as transcripts of nature and as apt symbols of national types, instantly recognizable as being of the same constituents as their surroundings and as of the same flesh and blood as themselves.

Even so, however, there remains another factor in this old controversy to be taken into account, which does not seem to have come under the notice of any commentator on Dickens with whose writings I am acquainted.

In *Sketches by Boz* Dickens had had what he alludes to as "the advantage of being illustrated by George Cruikshank." In *Pickwick Papers* most of the illustrations were done by Hablot K. Browne, "Phiz." The publication of *Oliver Twist* saw Cruikshank's return to power. And thenceforward, certainly until the

appearance of *Bleak House*, "Phiz" shared most largely in the glory of Dickens's fame.

Now many of us first read Dickens in the green-covered, large-paper *Household* edition, as the present writer did. And this edition was illustrated by such artists as Fred Barnard, Marcus Stone, and Luke Fildes. To my own boyish eyes these artist's illustrations of Dickens seemed as inevitably right and fitting as brown crust to a white loaf of bread. I had a feeling of finality about them. I could conceive of no other presentment of Dickens's characters as being even possible. I was in my teens when I first saw the Cruikshank and "Phiz" illustrations; and by that time I knew my Dickens as well as I knew my right hand.

Merely to say, then, that these pictures were a shock to me is to describe my sensations on beholding them for the first time in terms of the feeblest inadequacy. They disgusted, they revolted me. They seemed an outrage on the beauty of the books: a foul practical joke of the most godless and wanton kind, a sinister perversion of the whole spirit of the author. Their stark ugliness, their flagrant and blatant vulgarity and coarseness, their lack of the most rudimentary signs of any delicacy or restraint, their hideous unsightliness and wild grotesquerie, their banality of conception and their utter crassness of execution, and their tacit admission of ignorance as to any idea of the author's intentions or ideals: were as so many dog's defilements of the plinth of a lovely statue. There are a few pretty-pretty, wishy-washy countenances attached to here and there a young woman or a child and some backgrounds that are almost entirely admirable. But there is not a figure in the whole gallery that does not seem to belong to some first-class freak in a penny gaff. Were there ever such bellies outside the bestial obscenities of a Gillray or a Rowlandson? Such pipe-shanks of legs,

so bowed and knock-kneed and knotted at the joints, such pantomime-masks for heads and faces, such hands like hams and feet like fishing-punts, such noses of the jolly and snub and Punchinello sort, such antic attitudes and nightmare grimaces, such odds and ends of outlandish garments, such indecencies of flesh and bone, such deformities of physique and such deliriously phantasmal facial horrors, as are to be found in these most appalling outrages on any fair edifice of art ?

It is no wonder that Dickens, so soon as he had outgrown his first natural diffidence and his generous sense of gratitude to these abortionists, protested hotly and vehemently against these horrible and stupid misrepresentations of the creatures his imagination had so vividly and realistically visualized. Many authors have suffered cruel disservice at the hands of incompetent illustrators, but surely none has suffered as poor Dickens did. No more gross and inept misinterpretations of *Hamlet* have ever been given by the very worst of the many gangs of mumbling, fumbling, illiterate amateurs who delight to maul Shakespeare's masterpiece, than are here given in these ridiculous and preposterous pictures of scenes and characters from Dickens's works.

As I say, they sickened and disgusted me when I first saw them, and I can never gaze on them now without a shudder and a feeling between spleen and annoyance, blent with a faintly mirthful sense of their extreme absurdity. They are as unlike the creations of the Master's brain as a painted, stuffed wax effigy is unlike the warm, breathing body of a beautiful woman or man. Their effect upon the popular apprehension of the time during which they appeared must have been completely disastrous and inimical. The miracle to me is that they did not damn the novels in which they were bound up, once for all. That they damaged Dickens's reputation almost irremediably I do verily believe. They form in themselves a series of perfectly lucid

explanations of the origin of those outworn pompous shibboleths about Dickens's tendency toward exaggeration and caricature which are still the staple clap-trap of certain sheep-like critical coteries. Dickens never meant his beloved people to be like that. They were meant to be human beings, not the ghoulish, frightful spectres of febrile hallucination. There is dignity and seemliness and probability in the pictures by Barnard and others; there is beauty and humour, grace and pathos in them. But these——!

It is the fixed conviction of one Dickens admirer, at least, that the greater part of the misunderstanding of his art that still exists is due to his misfortune in having such abominations of desolation foisted upon his novels as illustrations.

III

Among the minor services to the cause of social reform which *Oliver Twist* incidentally at least attempted, one always recalls with peculiar pleasure the episode in which Mr. Fang figures. Dickens always delighted unctuously to admit the identity of the fictional Mr. Fang with an actual living Mr. Laing, of Hatton Garden. "Wanting an insolent and harsh police-magistrate, he bethought him of an original ready to his hand in one of the London offices; and instead of pursuing his later method of giving a personal appearance that should in some sort render difficult the identification of mental peculiarities, he was only eager to get in the whole man complete upon his page, figure and face, as well as manners and mind." And this is how he did it. "A lean, long-backed, stiff-necked, middle-sized man, with no great quantity of hair, and what he had growing on the back and sides of his head. His face was stern, and much flushed. If he were not in the habit of drinking rather more than was exactly good for him, he might

have brought an action against his countenance for libel, and have recovered heavy damages."

The brutal insolence of this jack-in-office is so justly made an object-lesson to other magistrates of a like disposition that one yearns for the pen and the directly effective methods of some equally bold literary free-lance, to do us a similar service at the present day in exposing other magistrates of the same kidney who, unfortunately, are still to be found in too great abundance on the bench. Even during the month of November, 1907, the present writer noted how a London magistrate sentenced a prisoner to two months' hard labour; and then, when the saucy fellow in a spirit of bravado muttered aloud: "Pity you don't make it three!" how this legal light forthwith clapped on an extra month and did "make it three," thereby straining his discretionary privileges in direct defiance of the law, but to the mirthful admiration of his court; an instance of splenetic tyranny that passed utterly without public condemnation by any of the pressmen present; who, indeed, only turned the incident to humorous account and punctuated their report with "laughter," as if it had been one of the hardly less baneful puerilities of Mr. Plowden or some other judicial wit of his small calibre.

That abuse of power in which such shallow-pates as these have always been fond of indulging had an irresistible fascination for Dickens that constantly drew his withering fire. Always public-spirited, he exulted in exercising his gift of caustic ridicule on such objects, and only very rarely misdirected it. . . . As he most assuredly did not misdirect it in his attack on the whole Pauper System in this same novel.

Oliver Twist was begun in 1837 and possibly was suggested by the appointment of a Commission in 1832 to inquire into the operation of the Poor Laws, and the evils that had grown out of the maladministration of the

old Act of 1796, in spite of the two subsequent Vestry Acts of 1817, which had been passed on the report of an earlier Commission in order to check them.

It was in 1834 that the commissioners reported that they found the administration "opposed to the letter and spirit of the law, and destructive of the welfare of the community." The commissioners laid down the principle that the condition of the pauper ought to be below the lowest condition of the independent labourer, because every penny spent in rendering his condition more supportable was a bounty on indolence and vice, and recommended (1) the cessation of outdoor relief; (2) a central authority to control the administration; (3) unions for the better management of workhouses, and the classification of their inmates; and (4) a complete and clear system of accounts. The Bill embodying these recommendations was brought in, 17 March, 1834, passed its second reading in the House of Commons with only twenty dissenting votes, and became law on 14 August as the 4th and 5th Will. IV. chap. 76. This Act was not a change of law but of administration. The orders of the new board restricted overseers, on the formation of a union, to the collection of rates; appointed paid relieving officers to dispense relief under the directions of the unpaid Boards of Guardians; required the gradual withdrawal of outdoor relief; and enforced classification and discipline in the workhouses. A rapid formation of unions took place under the new board. In the first eight months 112 were formed, including 2066 parishes. The ratepayers in the pauperized districts experienced a great and immediate relief, numbers of paupers going off the rates when they found that relief involved compensatory labour or the strictly disciplined workhouse; and so the expenditure was reduced, on an average, twenty per cent.

Thus runs the cold official report; and one can easily see how a stupid and heartless rage for economy in the

outlay of money at any cost of suffering had set in. Indeed, one reads that whereas at the accession of George I, in 1714, the poor rates amounted, as nearly as can be estimated, to £950,000, equal to 3s. 3¾d. per head on the population of 5,750,000; and that at the accession of George III, in 1760, when the population had increased to 7,000,000, and the poor rates to £1,250,000—an average of 3s. 6¾d.; in 1834 the population, estimated at the last census, was 14,372,000, and the money expended in relief £6,317,255—equal to 8s. 9½d. per head. But how much of this had gone into the pockets of the administrators and their parasites, and those who accepted large sums of money as their reward for ridding the parish of encumbrances in the shape of children, does not appear. The immediate result of the application of the new Amendment Act, however, was a reduction of the total expenditure by one-third—viz. to £4,044,741—in three years.

That Dickens had probed the facts behind these figures is extremely unlikely. Nevertheless he appreciated the plain outcome of them. He saw that all this legislation had signally failed in its ostensible object. And so his single-minded aim in exposing the hideous conditions under which paupers, and especially pauper children, were still condemned to suffer was to bring about that summary improvement in them which Parliament seemed incapable of doing; nor is there any room for doubt that the good he wrought was considerable, even in the face of the apathy and indifference of the State. Still, the law's delays are long, long delays, and it is sadly to be confessed that Dickens died before his purpose was so much as half achieved. It was a purpose, however, that he never lost sight of and never relinquished; for which, indeed, he ever continued to fight, strenuously and tenaciously, striking his final blow in his last completed book, *Our Mutual Friend*, and never willingly laying down his arms in despair.

And though he did not live, as even we may not, to see any fine fruition of his hopes, yet he did a great deal in *Oliver Twist*, and in that book alone, if only in the creation of the beadle Bumble, that colossal figure which still stands as the ignominious type of all that is ridiculous and cruel and vile in our Poor Law system. Which stands for vastly more, in that it holds up to derision and contempt all the follies and the vices and the sillinesses that are the inevitable appanages of flunkeyism in whatsoever form it manifests itself; which makes of the pomp and panoply of Courts and Royalties, as well as of our Lord Mayoralties and their attendant aldermanic absurdities of ritual and ceremony and costume; of the clotted ignorance and vain pretension, of greed and gluttony and snobbery, and the fat-witted self-complacency of all similar modern functions and functionaries; which makes of them at once a laughing-stock and a byword to all the truly cultured, thinking classes, and to the ready sense of humour that twinkles in the eye of the Man in the Crowd. Bumble, with his bloated body and swollen head, his grog-blossoms, his cocked hat and gold lace and staff of office, his little mind and big heavy hand, famous in cartoon and satire and lampoon for threescore years and ten already, has not yet outlived his span of life nor abated one jot or tittle of his significance as an outstanding example of what pig-headed conceit and mutton-headed stupidity can bring the race of men to.

If Dickens, in *Oliver Twist*, had done nothing but give us this ugly, gaudy, repulsive symbol of corruption and bribery, toadyism and sycophancy, vested interest and high chicane and foul privilege, he had done enough, if all unconsciously, to further the cause of Socialism and to entitle him to a niche in our temple of heroes that is even now a-building.

CHAPTER IV

"NICHOLAS NICKLEBY"

I

THE legitimate farce of *Pickwick Papers* and the real tragic talent displayed in passages of *Oliver Twist* are not always very skilfully blended in this, Dickens's fourth book; with the result that though it unmistakably marks a considerable imaginative advance on his previous work in its depiction of character, and especially in the wider scope of its humour, which in this book is infinitely deeper and richer in quality, and more varied and more subtly satisfying than in his two former novels—the general effect of much of the writing that is meant to be seriously impressive is in many instances only that of crude melodrama.

In other respects also this book displays in excess some of Dickens's worst and most irritating faults. Indeed it is the most easily assailable of them all; and no doubt for that reason is most frequently selected for attack. The wild heroics of young Nicholas, with his "Whence will come curses at your command?" and other similar outbursts; the tawdry theatricality of such limelight-puppets as Ralph Nickleby, Gride, and Peg Sliderskew; the ineffable insipidity of Kate Nickleby and Madeline Bray; and the filmy formlessness and colourlessness of such lifeless stocks as, for instance, Frank Cheeryble: all these are blemishes that it would be impossible to gloze and impolitic to ignore. They must be taken into account as signs of the state of mental

transition through which Dickens was obviously passing at that time.

We can see him enlarging his borders of observation still further—prematurely and unwisely, now—in order to include certain phases of life and character which he does not seem to have been sufficiently familiar with to present altogether accurately, and would have done better to let alone for a while. But it was one of the chief drawbacks of Dickens's early and immediate success that it forced him to go on taking lessons in his art and making all sorts of experiments—in public, as it were—that had better been mastered and tested in the privacy of his own study before the outcome was given to the world. It was, however, one of his saving graces that he could realize the majority of his mistakes, even as he perpetuated them, as is patent from the fact that they were hardly ever repeated later on, in exactly the same form; and that the faults in which they had their root—faults mainly of an exuberant fancy and a too facile readiness of invention—were afterwards held in better check and sternly disciplined to their appointed ends.

Nicholas Nickleby, then, must be considered as marking a transitional stage of Dickens's development. As in each fresh essay hitherto, we find him bent on adventuring on new untrodden ways; this time attempting descriptions of types and scenes culled, here and there, from a quasi-aristocratic milieu, from fashionable and polite circles, and from the Bohemian society of a fifth-rate provincial theatrical company. The whole social level of the characters is thus raised a grade or two above that of *Oliver Twist*. In *Nicholas Nickleby* we are introduced to a wonderfully assorted crowd of minor figures, all of whom belong properly to that sphere of shabby-genteel existence in which Dickens invariably scored most easily and surely. For though some of the types that he had already presented in *Oliver Twist* and

Pickwick were veritable creations of genius; and in the case of Bill Sikes particularly we have one that will endure as a fit representative for all time of the surly, burly, ruffianly robber; as a matter of literal fact these are not individual but composite types. Thus, Sikes does not seem to have been cut out for a burglar at all. As a "casual buster" he might have done well enough; but it is flash Toby Crackit, alert, astute, adroit, and crafty, who more nearly approaches to the ideal housebreaker-type of criminal to which Sikes is popularly accepted as peculiarly belonging. Here, however, Dickens is hardly to blame for the public's wrong-headedness in adopting one strongly marked type of evildoer as the very apotheosis of another.

The truth is that in *Nicholas Nickleby* Dickens was disposed more and more to let certain banal conventions obsess and warp his natural artistic perception. He was becoming careless of truth and probability in his care of his story. In *Oliver Twist* he had come perilously near to destroying all the power and the glory of even such a mighty figure as Bumble by entangling him in the clumsy machinery of a feeble and commonplace plot. In *Nicholas Nickleby* he made a further descent into the same abyss by grafting melodrama on to what was intrinsically a novel of manners. Fortunately for his reputation, the elaborate and laboured weakness of the devices which he employed to impart a strained and false additional interest to both these books was so counterbalanced by the strength and reality of their more spontaneous elements that their defects were ultimately made of little moment in the general excellence of their finer parts. But really, *Nicholas Nickleby* is only saved from the painful ineptitude of its construction by its inimitable delineations of poverty-stricken respectability, and its intensity of feeling.

And it is just this intensity of feeling, expressing itself in terms of passionate pity and sympathy with

suffering and misery, that gives *Nicholas Nickleby* its value as a contribution to the cause of humanity.

And not less emphatically or eloquently in its exposition of the twittering conscience of the little miniature-painter, Miss La Creevy, torn between self-interest and good-nature, than in its insight into the workings of the muddled mind and addled brain of the fallen gentleman, Newman Noggs: is the lesson of a divine tolerance applied by the great humanist. The Kenwigses and the Knags, the Mantalinis, Mr. Lilyvick, the Crummleses and all that group, Miss Squeers and Tilly Price, John Browdie and Tim Linkinwater, and that most cruel and vile, yet withal incomparably droll, scoundrel of a one-eyed Squeers, the schoolmaster: these admittedly are all of the commonest clay, but how deftly moulded to a human pattern by the great potter's hand. For whilst we laugh with them and at them, whilst we shrink in disgust and avert our eyes in loathing of their meanness and vulgarity, yet we are never led on to despise or flout or hate them, but always to sorrow for their disadvantages, to palliate their faults, and to weep for their pitiful lack of better chances. The noble service rendered to this essentially squalid and unpicturesque and superficially uninteresting order of beings is one that only a man of Dickens's unique talent and large capacity of heart could possibly have wrought. And that he did not disdain, but indeed found his best pleasure in using his powers to equally worthy purpose in his exploitation of that ghastly abstraction, the hapless Smike, and in all the other spectral figures of tormented and afflicted childhood that were huddled together in that pestilential lazarhouse, Dotheboys Hall, is yet one more item added to the debt of gratitude that the masses owe to him. In his leisurely, exquisitely humorous pictures of the dull class that yearns to be respectable, even at the sacrifice of its own self-respect, with all its follies and weaknesses thick upon its head,

but with its virtues also freely and fully set forth, he is no less effective than in such grimly forcible isolated passages, more easily quotable, as the following :—

" . . . The pupils . . . ! Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long and meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together ; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring, or of young lives which, from the earliest dawn of infancy, had been one horrible endurance of cruelty and neglect. There were little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with the scowl of sullen, dogged suffering ; there was childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone, and its helplessness alone remaining ; there were vicious-faced boys, brooding, with leaden eyes, like malefactors in a jail ; and there were young creatures on whom the sins of their frail parents had descended, weeping even for the mercenary nurses they had known, and lonesome even in their loneliness. With every kindly sympathy and affection blasted in its birth, with every young and healthy feeling flogged and starved down, with every revengeful passion that can fester in swollen hearts eating its evil way to their core in silence, what an incipient Hell was breeding here ! "

In his Preface Dickens records, surely for once with a pardonable self-complacency, that whereas when *Nicholas Nickleby* was begun there were a great many such schools as this Dotheboys Hall in existence, before the book itself had attained the distinction of inclusion in a uniform edition there were very few. And he goes on :—

" Of the monstrous neglect of education in England,

and the disregard of it by the State as a means of forming good or bad citizens, and miserable or happy men, private schools long afforded a notable example. Although any man who had proved his unfitness for any other occupation in life, was free, without examination or qualification, to open a school anywhere; although preparation for the functions he undertook was required in the surgeon who assisted to bring a boy into the world, or might one day assist perhaps to send him out of it; in the chemist, the attorney, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker; the whole round of crafts and trades, the schoolmaster excepted; and although schoolmasters as a race were the blockheads and impostors who might naturally be expected to spring from such a state of things, and to flourish in it; these Yorkshire schoolmasters were the lowest and most rotten round in the whole ladder. Traders in the avarice, indifference, or imbecility of parents, and the helplessness of children; ignorant, sordid, brutal men, to whom few considerate persons would have entrusted the board and lodging of a horse or a dog; they formed the worthy corner-stone of a structure which, for absurdity and a magnificent high-minded *laissez-aller* neglect, has rarely been exceeded in the world.

"We hear sometimes of an action for damages against the unqualified medical practitioner, who has deformed a broken limb in pretending to heal it. But what of the hundreds of thousands of minds that have been deformed for ever by the incapable pettifoggers who have pretended to form them?"

In a previous chapter something has already been said of the educational laws in England at that time; but if this were the place to do so a good deal could be added from personal experience of the abuses that prevailed under the system in some of our National Schools even as late as twenty-five years ago, which would tend to prove how slow has been the work of

reform in this regard, and how urgent is the need of constant and unflagging agitation to-day.

II

Lord Frederick Verisopht and Sir Mulberry Hawk, with the latter's two congeners, Messrs. Pluck and Pyke, are commonly reckoned as the outstanding failures of *Nicholas Nickleby;* but there are some who would preferably award the wooden spoon to the Brothers Cheeryble—and the present writer is among them.

The vexed question of Dickens's ability to depict a "gentleman" may be more conveniently postponed until later on, perhaps. The present opportunity will better serve to consider my lord and the baronet, the pigeon and the hawk. The popular mistake in regard to them is the usual one—where Dickens is concerned—and which has been pointed out before—of confusing the deliberate delineation of a composite type with an attempt to present an individual type. As living specimens of a raffish, dissipated class Lord Frederick and Sir Mulberry are quite recognizably true to the life of to-day; and varieties of the same genera may still be found about the West End of London, in clubs, in music-halls, in saloon bars and hotels, on the racecourse and in the night-house, and wheresoever else well-dressed rascality makes its favourite haunt for preying on gilded ignorance and folly and vice. Obviously Dickens erred, grossly and flagrantly, in bestowing so farcical a name as Verisopht on the empty-headed, good-hearted sprig of nobility who was afterwards to be allotted so tragic a part in the novel. But the plain moral of the relations between this poor rich young nincompoop and the unscrupulous aristocratic sharper who battened on his simple witless generosity is as forcible and instructive in its application now as ever it was. And so long as

a clean collar continues to carry off a dirty record and well-bred insolence can stare down modest worth, so long shall we have our foul parasitical Mulberry Hawks. And so long as the power and unbridled licence that wealth and a lofty station confer upon ill-balanced, feckless, reckless youth are used to ignoble and pitiable ends, so long shall we have our Lord Verisophts wasting their substance, and a possible heritage of goodness and ability into the bargain, on the lusts of the eye and the gratifications of the flesh, perchance to die at last as he did, if not by the bullet, " by the hand which he had loaded with gifts and clasped a thousand times ; by the act of him, but for whom and others like him, he might have lived a happy man and died with children's faces round his bed." There is, then, much merit in the skilful interlineation of a spoilt career that might have been so brilliant with the other more humdrum but equally spoilt lives of the story, that would be well worth while, if only for the reflections to which it gives rise.

But the Brothers Cheeryble are altogether abominable and raise our gorge. They are twins, so alike in their outward and inward attributes as to be indistinguishable from one another, and therefore the following description of one of them will do for both :—

" He was a sturdy old fellow in a broad-skirted blue coat, made pretty large, to fit easily, and with no particular waist ; his bulky legs clothed in drab breeches and high gaiters, and his head protected by a low-crowned, broad-brimmed white hat, such as a wealthy grazier might wear. He wore his coat buttoned ; and his dimpled double chin rested in the folds of a white neckerchief—not one of your stiff-starched, apoplectic cravats, but a good easy old-fashioned white neck-cloth that a man might go to bed in and be none the worse for. But what principally attracted the attention of Nicholas was the old gentleman's eye—never was such

a clear, twinkling, honest, merry, happy eye as that. And there he stood, looking a little upward, with one hand thrust into the breast of his coat, and the other playing with his old-fashioned gold watch-chain; his head thrown a little on one side, and his hat a little more on one side than his head (but that was evidently accident; not his ordinary way of wearing it), with such a pleasant smile playing about his mouth, and such a comical expression of mingled slyness, simplicity, kind-heartedness, and good-humour lighting up his jolly old face, that Nicholas would have been content to have stood there, and looked at him until evening, and to have forgotten, meanwhile, that there was such a thing as a soured mind or a crabbed countenance to be met with in the whole wide world."

This extract is given at length because it aptly expresses, in its misguided love of its subject and its tenderly whimsical dalliance with the outer aspect of this fine old fellow (as the author evidently imagines him to be), Dickens's entirely false estimate of such people. There is a nauseous unction about all the descriptions of this old man and his brother and their ways that is nothing less than infuriating to any man who recognizes what the existence of such characters really implies. Presently this same old gentleman figures in an incident which may also be set down rather fully.

"'Is my brother in his room, Tim?' said Mr. Cheeryble. . . .

"'Yes he is, sir,' replied the fat clerk . . . 'but Mr. Trimmers is with him.'

"'Ay! And what has he come about, Tim?' . . .

"'He is getting up a subscription for the widow and family of a man who was killed in the East India docks this morning, sir,' rejoined Tim. 'Smashed, sir, by a cask of sugar.'

"'He is a good creature,' said Mr. Cheeryble, with

great earnestness. 'He is a kind soul. I am very much obliged to Trimmers. Trimmers is one of the best friends we have. He makes a thousand cases known to us that we should never discover of ourselves. I am *very* much obliged to Trimmers.' Saying which, Mr. Cheeryble rubbed his hands with infinite delight, and Mr. Trimmers happening to pass the door that instant, on his way out, shot out after him and caught him by the hand.

"'I owe you a thousand thanks, Trimmers, ten thousand thanks. I take it very friendly of you, very friendly indeed,' said Mr. Cheeryble. . . . 'How many children are there, and what has my brother Ned given, Trimmers?'

"'There are six children,' replied the gentleman, 'and your brother has given us twenty pounds.'

"'My brother Ned is a good fellow, and you're a good fellow, too, Trimmers,' said the old man, shaking him by both hands with trembling eagerness. "Put me down for another twenty—or—stop a minute, stop a minute! We mustn't look ostentatious; put me down ten pound, and Tim Linkinwater ten pound. . . . Smashed by a cask of sugar, and six poor children—oh dear, dear, dear!'"

We have a Workmen's Compensation Act nowadays to meet these contingencies.

But all this is only one of the first pieces of evidence of that queer mental bias in Dickens which was afterwards to express itself in countless other as inexplicable directions, and which forms one of the most unsatisfactory ingredients in his manifold nature. In his Preface he writes reflectively of the egregious twin-brothers in this strain:—

"To turn to a more pleasant subject, it may be right to say, that there *are* two characters in this book which are drawn from life. It is remarkable that what we call the world, which is so very credulous in what professes

to be true, is most incredulous in what professes to be imaginary; and that, while, every day in real life, it will allow in one man no blemishes, and in another no virtues, it will seldom admit a very strongly-marked character, either good or bad, in a fictitious narrative, to be within the limits of probability. But those who take an interest in this tale will be glad to learn that the Brothers Cheeryble live; that their liberal charity, their singleness of heart, their noble nature, and their unbounded benevolence, are no creations of the author's brain; but are prompting every day (and oftenest by stealth) some munificent and generous deed in that town of which they are the pride and honour."

And as a fitting corollary to the above may be cited the following curious sentence from the last chapter of *Nicholas Nickleby*, relating to the fate of Ralph Nickleby's vast hoard: "Having died intestate . . . the riches for which he had toiled all his days, and burdened his soul with so many evil deeds, were swept at last into the coffers of the State, and no man was the better or the happier for them."

"No man was the better or the happier for them!" Possibly not. But they had returned to the general source of wealth from which they had been improperly derived and may thus have served to remedy some of the ills their unrighteous accumulation had caused. Dickens is revealed in such passages as this, not even as the unwitting, uninformed Socialist, wanting instruction and guidance, but as a wilful partaker in blindness who regarded the national exchequer as a sort of limbo in which wealth was annihilated completely, and from which no benefit could ever accrue to the common good. He had, perhaps, his ironical reasons for such an assumption, but he was not writing in any ironic vein. No, these words must be read as eloquently expressive of the condition of mind in which he, along with the majority of Englishmen, were plunged

at that time: a condition of mind which seems to have had no conception at all of the State as a guardian and protector—an abiding Providence, in fact, over the people. At this stage of his development his political philosophy lacked both an economic and a moral basis. He had no perception whatever of the twin facts that no man can lay up for himself treasure on earth without doing rank injustice to a greater or smaller number of his fellows, and that only the State can perform the functions of an equitable almoner of the national wealth. Thus he glorified the private charity of self-made plutocrats, which could be but the handing back, in paltry doles, of a portion of their unearned increment, the fruits of a wicked spoliation of the poor and needy. This was one of the limitations of Dickens which he never succeeded in altogether breaking down; and it stultified him and made nugatory much of the good work for social reform that he would otherwise have accomplished.

CHAPTER V

"THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP" AND "BARNABY RUDGE"

I

THESE two books are bracketed together for a variety of reasons, of which the most important is, perhaps, that they seem to be the least significant of Dickens's novels in that main connection, at least, with which this volume is concerned. That is to say: they contain only very slight and cursory evidences of Dickens's progress toward an unconscious Socialism and in themselves afford us only the faintest side-lights of the gradual awakening of his mind to a realization of the general unsatisfactoriness of the political codes of his time. They are, however, notable as being the last of the novels which belong to what may be conveniently termed Dickens's First Period; that period during which circumstances forced him to write continuously at high pressure, and to rely almost wholly on his native powers of invention and his store of early experiences for his inspiration. Indeed, we see how, even in *Barnaby Rudge*, these sources of inspiration which had hitherto sufficed were already beginning to fail him; and how, for the first time, he sought a new central element of interest in an historical event of a past epoch.

It is also to be remembered that during this First Period, which extended over less than six years—from 1836 to 1841—he had published six immensely long books and certainly written every word of five of them,

besides engaging in all manner of outside tasks, editorial and other. He was twenty-four years old when *Sketches by Boz*, and twenty-nine when *Barnaby Rudge*, was published. It was a period of amazing industry, and the amount of hard work that he crammed into it may be estimated from the fact that whereas he only wrote fourteen complete novels in all, the first five were written in less than six years, whilst the remaining nine were spread over twenty-nine years. As Jack Bunsby would say: "The bearings of this observation lays in the application on it." That much of the work done at such white-hot speed should bear upon it, here and there, traces of haste was inevitable. After *Barnaby Rudge* there came a break—a pause—a breathing-space—an interval in which to reconnoitre forces—and then the beginning of a new, fresh era.

It is not surprising, therefore, that *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*, despite their dissimilarity of theme, should both suffer from the same faults. In each the effects are frequently a little overwrought and too highly coloured. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* the pathos tends to slop over into (frankly) maudlin sentimentality, whilst in *Barnaby Rudge* the tragedy often degenerates into rank melodrama. Nevertheless, there are descriptive passages in both novels which, for power and vividness, Dickens never excelled; there are studies of character that rank beside his very best achievements in his own peculiar genre; and in their thoughtfulness of tone and fineness of point, in vigour and spirit and in sheer artistry, they leave their predecessors far behind.

Let there be given, first, samples of the deepening thoughtfulness of the treatment so abundantly apparent in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The reflections quoted may very possibly read as somewhat trite and even naive to our modern intelligence; but they were not so at the time they were written, and even yet they

may be profitably conned perhaps, if not for their message, for their simple direct earnestness and sincerity.

". . . If ever household affections and loves are graceful things, they are graceful in the poor. The ties that bind the wealthy and the proud to home may be forged on earth, but those which link the poor man to his humble hearth are of the truer metal and bear the stamp of Heaven. The man of high descent may love the halls and lands of his inheritance as a part of himself; as trophies of his birth and power; his associations with them are associations of pride and wealth and triumph; the poor man's attachment to the tenements he holds, which strangers have held before, and may to-morrow occupy again, has a worthier root, struck deep into a purer soil. His household gods are of flesh and blood, with no alloy of silver, gold, or precious stone; he has no property but in the affections of his own heart; and when they endear bare floors and walls, despite of rags and toil and scanty fare, that man has his love of home from God, and his rude hut becomes a solemn place.

" Oh! if those who rule the destinies of nations would but remember this—if they would but think how hard it is for the very poor to have engendered in their hearts that love of home from which all domestic virtues spring, when they live in dense and squalid masses where social decency is lost, or rather never found—if they would but turn aside from the wide thoroughfares and great houses, and strive to improve the wretched dwellings in byeways where only Poverty may walk—many low roofs would point more truly to the sky than the loftiest steeple that now rears proudly up from the midst of guilt and crime and horrible disease, to mock them by its contrast. In hollow voices from Workhouse, Hospital, and Jail, this truth is preached from day to day, and has been proclaimed for years. It is no

light matter—no outcry from the working vulgar—no mere question of the people's health and comforts that may be whistled down on Wednesday nights. In love of home the love of country has its rise; and who are the truer patriots or the better in time of need—those who venerate the land, owning its wood, and stream, and earth, and all that they produce? or those who love their country, boasting not a foot of ground in all its wide domain!"

Again:—

"Let moralists and philosophers say what they may, it is very questionable whether a guilty man would have felt half so much misery that night as Kit did, being innocent. The world, being in the constant commission of vast quantities of injustice, is a little too apt to comfort itself with the idea that if the victim of its falsehood and malice have a clear conscience, he cannot fail to be sustained under his trials, and somehow or other to come right at last; 'in which case,' say they who have hunted him down, 'though we certainly don't expect it, nobody will be better pleased than we.' Whereas the world would do well to reflect, that injustice is in itself, to every generous and properly constituted mind, an injury, of all others the most insufferable, the most torturing and the most hard to bear; and that many clear consciences have gone to their account elsewhere, and many sound hearts have broken, because of this very reason; the knowledge of their own deserts only aggravating their sufferings, and rendering them the less endurable."

And again, in this description of a common type of time-serving lawyer:—

"It was a maxim with Mr. Brass that the habit of paying compliments kept a man's tongue oiled without any expense; and as that useful member ought never to grow rusty or creak in turning on its hinges in the case of a practitioner of the law, in whom it should be

always glib and easy, he lost few opportunities of improving himself by the utterance of handsome speeches and eulogistic expressions. And this had passed into such a habit with him, that, if he could not be correctly said to have his tongue at his fingers' ends, he might certainly be said to have it anywhere but in his face; which being . . . of a harsh and repulsive character, was not oiled so easily, but frowned above all the smooth speeches—one of nature's beacons, warning off those who navigated the shoals and breakers of the World . . . and admonishing them to seek less treacherous harbours and try their fortune elsewhere."

And yet again in the following exquisitely observed and pungently rendered transcripts from everyday experience. Here is the first :—

"'You're the wax-work child, are you not?' said Miss Monflathers.

"'Yes, ma'am,' replied Nell. . . .

"'And don't you think you must be a very wicked little child,' said Miss Monflathers . . . 'to be a wax-work child at all? . . . Don't you know that it's very naughty and unfeminine, and a perversion of the properties wisely and benignantly transmitted to us, with expansive powers to be roused from their dormant state through the medium of cultivation. . . . Don't you feel how naughty it is of you to be a wax-work child, when you might have the proud consciousness of assisting, to the extent of your infant powers, the manufactures of your country; of improving your mind by the constant contemplation of the steam-engine; and of earning a comfortable and independent subsistence of from two-and-ninepence to three shillings per week? Don't you know that the harder you are at work the happier you are?'

"'How doth the little——' murmured one of the teachers. . . .

"'The little busy bee,' said Miss Monflathers, draw-

ing herself up, 'is applicable only to genteel children. "In books, or work, or healthful play" is quite right so far as they are concerned; and the work means painting on velvet, fancy needlework, or embroidery. In such cases as these,' pointing to Nell with her parasol, 'and in the case of all poor people's children, we should read it thus: —

> **In work, work, work. In work alway**
> **Let my first years be past,**
> **That I may give, for every day,**
> **Some good account at last.'"**

And here is the second transcript:—

"It seemed that a couple of poor families lived in this hovel, for two women, each among children of her own, occupied different portions of the room. In the centre, stood a grave gentleman in black who appeared to have just entered, and who held by the arm a boy.

"'Here, woman,' he said, 'here's your deaf and dumb son. You may thank me for restoring him to you. He was brought before me, this morning, charged with theft; and with any other boy it would have gone hard, I assure you. But as I had compassion on his infirmities, and thought he might have learnt no better, I have managed to bring him back to you. Take more care of him for the future'

"'And won't you give me back *my* son!' said the other woman, hastily rising and confronting him. 'Won't you give me back *my* son, sir, who was transported for the same offence.'

"'Was *he* deaf and dumb, woman?' asked the gentleman sternly.

"'Was he not, sir?'

"'You know he was not.'

"'He was,' cried the woman. 'He was deaf, dumb, and blind, to all that was good and right, from his cradle. Her boy may have learnt no better! where did mine learn better? where could he? who was

there to teach him better? or where was it to be learnt?'

"'Peace, woman,' said the gentleman, 'your boy was in possession of all his senses.'

"'He was,' cried the mother; 'and he was the more easy to be led astray because he had them. If you save this boy because he may not know right from wrong, why did you not save mine, who was never taught the difference? You gentlemen have as good a right to punish her boy, that God has kept in ignorance of sound and speech, as you have to punish mine, that you kept in ignorance yourselves. How many of the girls and boys—ah, men and women, too—that are brought before you, and you don't pity, are deaf and dumb in their minds, and go wrong in that state, and are punished in that state, body and soul, while you gentlemen are quarrelling among yourselves, whether they ought to learn this or that?—Be a just man, sir, and give me back my son.'

"'You are desperate,' said the gentleman, taking out his snuff-box, 'and I am sorry for you.'

"'I *am* desperate,' returned the woman, 'and you have made me so. Give me back my son, to work for these helpless children. Be a just man, sir, and as you have had mercy upon this boy, give me back my son!'"

But this book's excellence in pure description is best exemplified, perhaps, in its pictures of the Black Country, as true and forcible to-day as then; and from one of which the above extract is taken. Here is another, a fierce indictment of the horrors of that region, and of the cruel labour conditions that still make its existence possible in the richest and one of the most beautiful countries in the world:—

"On every side, and as far as the eye could see into the heavy distance, tall chimneys, crowding on each other, and presenting that endless repetition of the same dull ugly form, obscured the light and made foul the melan-

choly air. On mounds of ashes by the wayside, sheltered only by a few rough boards, or rotten pent-house roofs, strange engines spun and writhed like tortured creatures; clanking their iron chains, shrieking in their rapid whirl from time to time as though in torment unendurable, and making the ground tremble in their agonies. Dismantled houses here and there appeared, tottering to the earth, propped up by fragments of others that had fallen down, unroofed, windowless, blackened, desolate, but yet inhabited. Men, women, children, wan in their looks and ragged in attire, tended the engines, fed their tributary fire, begged upon the road, or scowled half-naked from the doorless houses. Then came more of the wrathful monsters, whose like they almost seemed to be in their wildness and their untamed air, screeching and turning round and round again; and still, before, behind, and to the right and left, was the same interminable perspective of brick towers, never ceasing in their black vomit, blasting all things living or inanimate, shutting out the face of day, and closing in on all these horrors with a dense black cloud.

"But, night-time in this dreadful spot!—night, when the smoke was changed to fire, when every chimney spirted up its flame; and places that had been dark vaults all day, now shone red-hot, with figures moving to and fro within their blazing jaws, and calling to one another with hoarse cries—night, when the noise of every strange machine was aggravated by the darkness; when the people near them looked wilder and more savage; when bands of unemployed labourers paraded the roads, or clustered by torch-light round their leaders, who told them in stern language of their wrongs, and urged them on to frightful cries and threats; when maddened men, armed with sword and firebrand, spurning the tears and prayers of women who would restrain them, rushed forth on errands of terror and

destruction, to work no ruin half so surely as their own—night, when carts came rumbling by, filled with rude coffins (for contagious disease and death had been busy with the living crops); when orphans cried, and distracted women shrieked and followed in their wake—night, when some called for bread, and some for drink to drown their cares, and some with tears, and some with staggering feet, and some with bloodshot eyes, went brooding home—night, which, unlike the night that Heaven sends on earth, brought with it no peace, nor quiet, nor signs of blessed sleep. . . ."

For the rest, the following brief extract from Forster's appreciation, carefully weeded out from some indiscriminate and dubious praise, may be given in conclusion :—

"The main idea and chief figure of the piece constitute its interest for most people, and give it rank upon the whole with the most attractive productions of English fiction. I am not acquainted with any story in the language more adapted to strengthen in the heart what most needs help and encouragement, to sustain kindly and innocent impulses, to awaken everywhere the sleeping germs of good. It includes necessarily much pain, much uninterrupted sadness; but the brightness and the sunshine are not lost in the gloom. The humour is so benevolent; the view of errors that have no depravity in them is so indulgent; the quiet courage under calamity, the purity that nothing impure can soil, are so full of tender teaching."

II

The chief attractions in *Barnaby Rudge* for the present writer—and they are both, in a way, attractions of repulsion, to employ Poe's phrase—lie in its delineation of the character of Sir John Chester, and in its

pictures of the Gordon Riots. The philosophy of the elegant man of fashion, cynic and wit, is as appropriate to a certain modern type as it was, no doubt, to its first exponent, Lord Chesterfield, on whom Sir John Chester is reputably founded.

"He wrote himself M.P.—but how? Why, thus. It was a proud family—more proud, indeed, than wealthy. He had stood in danger of arrest; of bailiffs, and a jail—a vulgar jail, to which the common people with small incomes went. Gentlemen of ancient houses have no privilege of exemption from such cruel laws—unless they are of one great house, and then they have.* A proud man of his stock and kindred had the means of sending him there. He offered—not indeed to pay his debts, but to let him sit for a close borough until his own son came of age, which, if he lived, would come to pass in twenty years. It was quite as good as an Insolvent Act, and infinitely more genteel. So Sir John Chester was a member of Parliament.

"But how Sir John? Nothing so simple, or so easy. One touch with a sword of state, and the transformation was effected. John Chester, Esquire, M.P., attended court—went up with an address—headed a deputation. Such elegance of manner, so many graces of deportment, such powers of conversation, could never pass unnoticed. Mr. was too common for such merit. A man so gentlemanly should have been—but Fortune is capricious—born a Duke: just as some dukes should have been born labourers. He caught the fancy of the king, knelt down a grub, and rose a butterfly. John Chester, Esquire, was knighted and became Sir John."

Follow: some of his choicest and most exquisite expressions of a polished, heartless cynicism:—

"The world is a lively place enough, in which we must accommodate ourselves to circumstances, sail

* Members of Parliament are still free from arrest in coming, going, or returning to the House—a most elastic condition.

with the stream as glibly as we can, be content to take froth for substance, the surface for the depth, the counterfeit for the real coin. I wonder that no philosopher has ever established that our globe itself is hollow. It should be, if Nature is consistent in her works."

"All men are fortune-hunters, are they not? The law, the church, the court, the camp—see how they are all crowded with fortune-hunters, jostling each other in the pursuit. The Stock-exchange, the pulpit, the counting house, the royal drawing-room, the senate—what but fortune-hunters are they filled with? A fortune-hunter? Yes. You *are* one; and you would be nothing else . . . if you were the greatest courtier, lawyer, legislator, prelate, or merchant, in existence. If you are squeamish and moral . . . console yourself with the reflection that at the very worst your fortune-hunting can make but one person miserable or unhappy. How many people do you suppose these other kinds of huntsmen crush in following their sport—hundreds at a step? Or thousands?"

"About to speak from your heart! Don't you know that the heart is an ingenious part of our formation—the centre of the blood-vessels and all that sort of thing—which has no more to do with what you say or think, than your knees have? How can you be so very vulgar and absurd? These anatomical allusions should be left to gentlemen of the medical profession. They are really not agreeable in society. . . . There are such things. We know there are. The hearts of animals—of bullocks, sheep, and so forth—are cooked and devoured, as I am told, by the lower classes, with a vast deal of relish. Men are sometimes stabbed to the heart, shot through the heart; but as to speaking from the heart, or to the heart, or being warm-hearted, or cold-hearted, or broken-hearted, or being all heart, or having no heart—pah! these things are nonsense. . . ."

And Dickens shows a remarkable and hitherto unprecedented power of unusual restraint in his handling of this exponent of a precious taste in dainty falseness and pretty insincerity. He allows Sir John, as a rule, to express his individuality in his speech and manners, and to let his words carry their own construction, only now and then permitting himself even such pertinent commentary as the following :—

"Men who are thoroughly false and hollow seldom try to hide those vices from themselves; and yet in the very act of avowing them, they lay claim to the virtues they feign most to despise. 'For,' say they, 'this is honesty, this is truth. All mankind are like us, but they have not the candour to avow it.' The more they affect to deny the existence of any sincerity in the world, the more they would be thought to possess it in its boldest shape; and this is an unconscious compliment to truth on the part of these philosophers, which will turn the laugh against them to the Day of Judgment."

"He smiled so very pleasantly as he communed with himself after this manner that a beggar was emboldened to follow for alms, and to dog his footsteps for some distance. He was gratified by the circumstance, feeling it complimentary to his power of feature, and as a reward suffered the man to follow him until he called a chair, when he graciously dismissed him with a fervent blessing. 'Which is as easy as cursing,' he wisely added, as he took his seat, 'and far more becoming to the face. . . .'"

Dickens's purpose in introducing into *Barnaby Rudge* some account of the Gordon Riots is thus set forth in his Preface, and may be pondered as peculiarly applicable to the form that certain phases of anti-Socialist agitation are apt to take in these latter days :—

"It is unnecessary to say that those shameful tumults, while they reflected indelible disgrace upon the time

in which they occurred, and all who had act or part in them, teach a good lesson. That what we falsely call a religious cry is easily raised by men who have no religion, and who in their daily practice set at naught the commonest principles of right and wrong; that it is begotten of intolerance and persecution; that it is senseless, besotted, inveterate, and unmerciful, all history teaches us."

But it is not so much for this expressed purpose as for its impressions of a furious, whirling period of anarchy and mob violence that *Barnaby Rudge* is notable. To quote once more from the invaluable Forster :—

"There are few things more masterly in any of his books. From the first low mutterings of the storm to its last terrible explosion, the frantic outbreak of popular ignorance and rage is depicted with unabated power. The aimlessness of idle mischief by which the ranks of the rioters are swelled at the beginning; the recklessness induced by the monstrous impunity allowed to the early excesses; the sudden spread of drunken guilt into every haunt of poverty, ignorance, or mischief in the wicked old city, where such rich materials of crime lie festering; the wild action of its poison on all, without scheme or plan of any kind, who come within its reach; the horrors that are more bewildering for so complete an absence of purpose in them; and, when all is done, the misery found to have been self-inflicted in every cranny and corner of London, as if a plague had swept over the streets; these are features in the picture of an actual occurrence, to which the manner of the treatment gives extraordinary force and meaning."

It is, then, for the rare literary quality of these pictures and for its additions to Dickens's gallery of immortal types in such figures as Gabriel Varden and his household, with the coquettish minx Dolly and that acidulated virgin, Miss Miggs; in John Willett and the

Maypole circle, including splendid, brutish Hugh; and in its study of Mr. Dennis, the hangman, that the book as a whole has its place in the scheme of these present labours. Because in these depictions, if it does not stand forth conspicuously as a contribution to the cause of democracy in that it conduces to a better understanding of its individual units, at least it does something more than merely mark time.

CHAPTER VI

"MARTIN CHUZZLEWIT"

I

DICKENS finished *Barnaby Rudge* early in November, 1841. The first number of *Martin Chuzzlewit* appeared in January, 1843. Thus more than a year elapsed between the conclusion of the one and the commencement of the other; and during that period Dickens was engaged on no serious literary work, but spent the greater part of his time in travelling over Scotland and in visiting the United States—for the first time.

Any form of idleness was abhorrent to such a restless and energetic nature as his; but there is no doubt that during this welcome interval his mind seized on the opportunity to rest and to recuperate, to grow and to expand. The effects of that period of comparative leisure—of surcease, at least, from the continuous and exigent labours that had occupied his every waking hour for the previous six years—are unmistakably apparent in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. He himself held that it marked a turning-point in his career. And he was justified in thinking and saying, as he did, that this novel was "in a hundred points immeasurably the best" of the works that he had yet produced. And the letter in which he utters this conviction, a little intemperately and peevishly, is interesting as revealing a newly awakened consciousness in Dickens of the limitations of any man's power to force the fickle public

into agreement with his own estimate of the value of his own achievements. He writes :—

"You know, as well as I do, that I think *Chuzzlewit* . . . the best of my stories. That I feel my power now, more than I ever did. That I have a greater confidence in myself than I ever had. That I *know*, if I have health, I could sustain my place in the minds of thinking men, though fifty writers started up to-morrow. But how many of my readers do *not* think! How many take it upon trust from knaves and idiots, that one writes too fast, or runs a thing to death! How coldly did this very book go on for months, until it forced itself up in people's opinion, without forcing itself up in sale!"

This was, in fact, the first time that Dickens had ever come into wounding conflict with the colossal indifference which the world is ever prone to throw up, like a thick blank wall, against the assaults of even its dispossessed and deposed favourites, not to speak of those unfortunate geniuses to whom it never takes the trouble to pay the small compliment of taking any cognizance whatever. For eight years Dickens had basked in the warm sunshine of popularity, and never a cloud had chilled the balmy atmosphere for him. He had gone on from strength to strength, from triumph to triumph, winning fresh plaudits and richer fame and an ever increasing share of more solid pecuniary benefits, at every effort. And he was still so young and so inexperienced that he could persuade himself into counting quite confidently on a steady continuance of these favours; and could build up his future on that most unsubstantial basis. It was nothing less than a shattering shock to him to discover that the public has such a vast capacity for growing suddenly apathetic toward its favourites, and for casting off its allegiance to its former idols as it loses its first enthusiasm about them.

The lesson—one may venture to add without, it is hoped, incurring any imputation of any sort of base

gratification—was in many respects highly salutary. It was disciplinary. It taught Dickens that public favour and public taste are not to be retained and held by any man merely because he is doing sterling work and giving the best that is in him to its perfection. But at first it only hurt his self-love and caused him to cry out splenetically and utter vain threats and scatter abuse. He talked wildly, for a while, in a spirit of irrational pique, of leaving the country that had ceased to do him sufficient honour and of transferring the lustre of his presence to a foreign clime. Second thoughts impelled him to add the more dignified plea that he contemplated this new move as tending to serve the best interests of his art as well as his pocket.

"If I wrote," he says, "for . . . forty thousand people who know I write because I can't help it, I should have no need to leave the scene. But this very book warns me that if I *can* leave it for a time, I had better do so, and must do so. Apart from that again, I feel that longer rest after this story would do me good. You say two or three months, because you have been used to see me for eight years never leaving off. But it is not rest enough. It is impossible to go on working the brain to that extent for ever. The very spirit of the thing, in doing it, leaves a horrible despondency behind, when it is done, which must be prejudicial to the mind, so soon renewed and so seldom let alone. What would poor Scott have given to have gone abroad, of his own free will, a young man, instead of creeping there, a driveller, in his miserable decay!"

Happily he was dissuaded from putting that resolution into action; but, rather unhappily, perhaps, the chief cause that helped to its abandonment was the sudden and overwhelming success, in a new and experimental direction, of his short story, *A Christmas Carol*, which set a new fashion in literature and at once restored him to his old position on a pinnacle of popularity.

At the same time, despite the circumstance that *Martin Chuzzlewit* was eventually to rank in point of sale only second to *Pickwick* and *David Copperfield*, its first reception was in the nature of a set-back for Dickens, and as such had its uses, beyond question, in clarifying his mind and partially setting him free from certain unhealthy illusions concerning himself. Hitherto his optimism had been too patently founded on a false assumption that intrinsic worth and merit cannot ultimately fail of their due reward. He was now to encounter a direct refutation of this vain theory in his own experience. Here he had written what he knew was surely his best book; and yet its sale—and Dickens was one of those authors who reckon the success of a book by its sale—had fallen from the sixty or seventy thousand copies of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* to a little over twenty thousand copies. He could not ignore the plain significance of this calamity. It opened his eyes to facts that were not to be blinked. It forced him to reconsider those comfortable canons of relative values which he had established in his own mind to his own entire satisfaction hitherto. It showed him that a comparative failure, in the worldly sense, may signalize the truest success, in another sense. Therefore, as I say, it was a salutary, a disciplinary, experience for Dickens. And it was essentially this: because its immediate effect upon him was to nerve his hand, and stiffen his determination, and enkindle his ambition anew. Momentarily cast down, he was permanently uplifted by this reverse to the mighty vindication of his genius which he subsequently compassed in this book, and to the accomplishment of which he bent every art at his command and every power he possessed in almost superabundant excess and concentrated vigour

He never did anything finer, in the way of delineating a type, than his study of Pecksniff; or exercised a wiser

restraint than he displayed in his handling of the would-be parricide and self-deceived murderer, Jonas Chuzzlewit. Mrs. Gamp has passed into the language, along with her non-existent acolyte, Mrs. Harris; Todgers's, young Bailey, and the Youngest Gentleman; Poll Sweedlepipe, the Moulds, Montague Tigg and the Anglo-Bengalee; and even that fine abstraction, Tom Pinch: are all instinct with a vital reality. His descriptive passages are cameo-clear vignettes of impressionism of a very high order indeed; his humour is more piquant and fuller and heartier in quality than ever; and even though his pictures of the American life of that extraordinary epoch are said to be overdone and the satire is certainly rather heavy-handed in places, it cannot be denied that he caught to a wonderful degree of accuracy some salient features of certain transatlantic types which are as broadly true and applicable to some Americans of to-day as in all probability they were at the time they were first written.

Apart from these considerations, however, it would seem that, after all, the obvious lesson of the comparative initial failure of *Martin Chuzzlewit* was never fully taken to heart by Dickens. One can almost deplore, in certain moods, that the book was not, for a time at least, an absolute fiasco—a complete failure, unmitigated by any countervailing contingencies, such as the success of *A Christmas Carol* provided. A spell of unrelieved black eclipse might have done Dickens incalculable good. It might have dethroned the god of popularity, to which he had ever bowed down in reverent worship, from its high place in his mind. It might have rid him finally of the shackles that bound him to the wheels of convention and held him subject to a humble observance of the edicts of Mrs. Grundy. It might have induced him to deny justice to the popular verdicts of the mass of the people, as expressed in their homage to himself, and have led him on to seek a higher tribunal

than public acclamation in the unfettered judgment of his own heart and brain. It is my belief that both Dickens's art and his conscience were warped and stultified by the inordinate success that came to him in such lavish measure and so readily. Had he suffered neglect; had he felt some of the bitter pangs that are born of an utter lack of appreciation; had he had to strive doggedly in the face of cold indifference and critical disdain, whilst inwardly assured of the greatness of his talent and the integrity of his ideals, he would have apprehended more exactly and equitably the value of most popular standards, and in despair of becoming a public idol have devoted his life and his gifts to the satisfying of the highest demands of his own nature.

II

In Forster's words: "The notion of taking Pecksniff for a type of character was really the origin of the book; the design being to show, more or less by every person introduced, the number and variety of humours and vices that have their root in selfishness." And never was any purpose more supremely consummated. The Americans need not have been so indignant against Dickens for what they stigmatized as his gross libels upon them and their country.

"They had no Pecksniff, at any rate. Bred in a more poisonous swamp than their Eden, of greatly older standing and much harder to be drained, Pecksniff was all our own. The confession is not encouraging to national pride, but this character is so far English that though our countrymen as a rule are by no means Pecksniffs, the ruling weakness is to countenance and encourage the race. When people call the character exaggerated, and protest that the lines are too broad to deceive anyone, they only refuse, naturally enough,

to sanction in a book what half their lives is passed in tolerating, if not in worshipping. Dickens, illustrating his never-failing experience of being obliged to subdue in his books what he knew to be real for fear it should be deemed impossible, had already made the remark in his Preface to *Nickleby* that the world, which is so very credulous in what professes to be true, is most incredulous in what professes to be imaginary. They agree to be deceived in a reality, and reward themselves by refusing to be deceived in a fiction. That a great many people who might have sat for Pecksniff should condemn him for a grotesque impossibility, as Dickens averred to be the case, was no more than might be expected. A greater danger he has exposed more usefully in showing the larger numbers who, desiring to be thought better than they are, support eagerly pretensions that keep their own in countenance, and without being Pecksniffs, render Pecksniffs possible. All impostures would have something suspicious or too forbidding in their look if we were not prepared to meet them half way."

And Pecksniffianism is still at the head of affairs in many of our national institutions to-day. The intolerable cant of godliness that emanates from our blood-sucking millionaires; the pious horror of our pot-bellied prelates confronted with elemental facts of human nature; the mock Puritanism of uxorious fathers of a swarming and under-vitalized progeny; the lip-service that is paid by our aristocracy to our plutocracy; the tender solicitude of the sweater, the usurer, and the slum-owner for the poor and helpless that goes with uplifted hands and a roll of white eyeballs; the pestiferous hypocrisy of vote-catching politicians; the sleek, smug self-complacency of well-paid charity-mongers: all these are unmistakable manifestations of the true Pecksniffian spirit.

M. Taine, the eminent French critic, has, however,

pointed out, for our consolation, that there is one thing favourable to us, even in the view we take of these slimy creatures. Informing us that there are no Pecksniffs to be found in France, he explains this by the fact that his countrymen have ceased to affect virtue and pretend only to vice; that a charlatan setting up morality would have no sort of following; that religion and the domestic virtues have gone so utterly to rags as not to be worth putting on for a deceitful garment; and that, no principles being left to parade, the only chance for the modern French Tartuffe is to confess and exaggerate his weaknesses. But even this argues a certain self-respect and a regard for honesty, even if it be touched with cynicism, in our neighbours which is surely preferable to our own vile state. Anyway, M. Taine wrote his criticisms forty or fifty years ago, and we have changed a good deal in that time. And if we did possess an advantage then it is doubtful if we still retain it. There was very little virtue, however we may regard it, in the homage that custom demanded from respectable vice to respectable virtue.

"'Charity, my dear,' says our English Tartuffe, upon being bluntly called what he really is, 'when I take my chamber-candlestick to-night, remind me to be more than usually particular in praying for Mr. Antony Chuzzlewit, who has done me an injustice.' No amount of self-indulgence weakens or lowers his pious and reflective tone. 'Those are her daughters,' he remarks, making maudlin overtures to Mrs. Todgers in memory of his deceased wife. 'Mercy and Charity, Charity and Mercy, not unholy names I hope. She was beautiful. She had a small property.' When his condition is such that his friends have to put him to bed, they are only half-way down the staircase when he is seen to be 'fluttering' on the top-landing, desiring to collect their sentiments on the nature of human life. 'Let us be moral. Let us contemplate existence.' He

turns his old pupil out of doors in the attitude of blessing him, and when he has discharged that social duty, sheds a few tears in the back garden. No conceivable position, action, or utterance finds him without the vice in which his being is wholly steeped and saturated. In his own house with his daughters he continues it to keep his hand in; and from the mere habit of keeping up appearances to himself falls into the trap of Jonas. Thackeray used to say there was nothing finer in rascaldom than this ruin of Pecksniff by his son-in-law at the very moment when the oily hypocrite believes himself to be achieving his masterpiece of dissembling over the more vulgar avowed ruffian. 'Jonas,' cried Mr. Pecksniff, much affected, 'I am not a diplomatical character; my heart is in my hand. By far the greater part of the inconsiderable savings I have accumulated in the course of—I hope—a not dishonourable or useless career, is already given, devised, or bequeathed (correct me, my dear Jonas, if I am technically wrong) with expressions of confidence which I will not repeat, and in securities which it is unnecessary to mention, to a person whom I cannot, whom I will not, whom I need not name.' Here he gave the hand of his son-in-law a fervent squeeze, as if he would have added, 'God bless you; be very careful of it when you get it.'"

But the following extracts from the novel itself will better serve to set forth the character of this man than any commentary:—

"... Mr. Pecksniff was a moral man. ... Perhaps there never was a more moral man than Mr. Pecksniff: especially in his conversation and correspondence. It was once said of him by a homely admirer that he had a Fortunatus's purse of good sentiments in his inside. In this particular he was like the girl in the fairy tale, except that if they were not actual diamonds which fell from his lips, they were the very brightest paste

and shone prodigiously. He was a most exemplary man: fuller of virtuous precept than a copy-book. Some people likened him to a direction-post, which is always telling the way to a place, and never goes there; but these were his enemies, the shadows cast by his brightness, that was all."

He keeps "his hand in his waistcoat as though he were ready, on the shortest notice, to produce his heart for inspection"; and in that posture behold him! first, haranguing poor harassed Mrs. Todgers:—

"'And do you mean to say, ma'am, is it possible, Mrs. Todgers, that for such a miserable consideration as eighteen shillings a week, a female of your understanding can so far demean herself as to wear a double face, even for an instant?'

"'I am forced to keep things on the square if I can, sir,' faltered Mrs. Todgers. . . . 'The profit is very small.'

"'The profit!' cried Mr. Pecksniff, laying great stress upon the word. 'The profit, Mrs. Todgers! You amaze me! . . . The profit of dissimulation! To worship the golden calf of Baal for eighteen shillings a week! . . . Oh, Calf! Calf! . . . Oh, Baal, Baal! Oh my friend, Mrs. Todgers! To barter away that precious jewel, self-esteem, and cringe to any mortal creature—for eighteen shillings a week!' . . . Eighteen shillings a week! Just, most just, thy censure, upright Pecksniff! Had it been for the sake of a ribbon, star, or garter; sleeves of lawn, a great man's smile, a seat in Parliament, a tap upon the shoulder from a courtly sword; a place, a party, or a thriving lie, or eighteen thousand pounds, or even eighteen hundred; but to worship the golden calf for eighteen shillings a week! Oh pitiful! pitiful!"

And then, on his dignity, before old Martin:—

"'No, my good sir,' said Mr. Pecksniff, firmly. 'No. But I have a duty to discharge which I owe to society; and it shall be discharged, my friend, at any cost.'

"Oh late remembered, much-forgotten, mouthing, braggart duty, always owed, and seldom paid in any other coin than punishment and wrath, when will mankind begin to know thee! When will men acknowledge thee in thy neglected cradle, and thy stunted youth, and not begin their recognition in thy sinful manhood and thy desolate old age. Oh ermined Judge, whose duty to society is, now, to doom the ragged criminal to punishment and death, hadst thou never, Man, a duty to discharge in barring up the hundred open gates that wooed him to the felon's dock, and throwing but ajar the portals of a decent life! Oh prelate, prelate, whose duty to society it is to mourn in melancholy phrase the sad degeneracy of these bad times in which thy lot of honours has been cast, did nothing go before thy elevation to the lofty seat, from which thou dealest out thy homilies to other tarriers for dead men's shoes, whose duty to society has not begun! Oh magistrate, so rare a country gentleman and brave a squire, had you no duty to society, before the ricks were blazing and the mob were mad; or did it spring up, armed and booted from the earth, a corps of yeomanry, full-grown!"

And against this loathsome type of Englishman may be set another, happily more scarce, but equally as real in its truculent ferocity and meanness and greed and spiteful cowardice: the figure of Jonas. His education. "had been conducted from his cradle on the strictest principles of the main chance. The very first word he learnt to spell was 'gain,' and the second (when he got into two syllables) 'money.' But for two results, which were not clearly foreseen perhaps by his watchful parent in the beginning, his training may be said to have been unexceptionable. One of these flaws was, that having been long taught by his father to overreach everybody, he had imperceptibly acquired a love of over-reaching that venerable monitor himself. The

other, that from his early habits of considering everything as a question of property, he had gradually come to look with impatience on his parent as a certain amount of personal estate, which had no right whatever to be going at large, but ought to be secured in that particular description of iron safe which is commonly called a coffin, and banked in the grave."

And the outcome of this training?

"'Ecod, you may say what you like of my father, then, and so I give you leave,' said Jonas. 'I think it's liquid aggravation that circulates through his veins, and not regular blood. How old should you think my father was, cousin?'

"'Old, no doubt,' replied Miss Charity, 'but a fine old gentleman.'

"'A fine old gentleman!' repeated Jonas, giving the crown of his hat an angry knock. 'Ah! It's time he was thinking of being drawn out a little finer, too. Why, he's eighty!'

"'Is he, indeed?' said the young lady.

"'And, ecod,' cried Jonas, 'now he's gone so far without giving in, I don't see much to prevent his being ninety; no, nor even a hundred. Why, a man with any feeling ought to be ashamed of being eighty, let alone more. Where's his religion, I should like to know, when he goes flying in the face of the Bible like that? Three-score-and-ten's the mark; and no man with a conscience, and a proper sense of what's expected of him, has any business to live longer.'"

Again, in this passage between the wretched old father and the unnatural, villainous son:—

"'Let the fire be!' cried Mr. Jonas, stopping his honoured parent's hand in the use of the poker. 'Do you mean to come to want in your old age that you take to wasting now?'

"'There's no time for that, Jonas,' said the old man.

"'No time for what?' bawled his heir.

" ' For me to come to want. I wish there was.'

" ' You always were as selfish an old blade as need be,' said Jonas. . . . ' You act up to your character. You wouldn't mind coming to want, wouldn't you! I daresay you wouldn't. And your own flesh and blood might come to want too, might they, for anything you cared? Oh you precious old flint! . . . Want, indeed! You're a nice old man to be talking of want at this time of day. Beginning to talk of want, are you? Well, I declare! There isn't time? No, I should hope not. But you'd live to be a couple of hundred, if you could; and after all be discontented. *I* know you. . . . If you're in such a state of mind as that . . . why don't you make over your property? Buy an annuity cheap, and make your life interesting to yourself and everybody else that watches the speculation. But, no, that wouldn't suit *you*. That would be natural conduct to your own son, and you like to be unnatural, and to keep him out of his rights. Why I should be ashamed of myself if I was you, and glad to hide my head in the what you may call it.' "

III

But to escape from this fetid atmosphere for a space. Perhaps the most delightfully humorous passage in any of Dickens's books is that in which Mr. Pecksniff and his two daughters figure at the house of a wealthy brass and copper founder. They have been paying a visit of condescension and patronage to Tom Pinch's sister, and culminating upon their offensive exhibition of bad manners and worse taste supervenes this episode.

" Mr. Pecksniff's delight in the tastefulness of the house was such that he could not help often stopping (particularly when they were near the parlour door) and giving it expression in a loud voice and very learned

terms. Indeed, he delivered, between the study and the hall, a familiar exposition of the whole science of architecture as applied to dwelling-houses, and was yet in the freshness of his eloquence when they reached the garden.

"'If you look,' said Mr. Pecksniff, backing from the steps with his head on one side and his eyes half shut that he might the better take in the proportions of the exterior: 'If you look, my dears, at the cornice which supports the roof, and observe the airiness of its construction, especially where it sweeps the southern angle of the building, you will feel with me—How do you do, sir? I hope you're well?'

"Interrupting himself with these words, he very politely bowed to a middle-aged gentleman at an upper window, to whom he spoke: not because the gentleman could hear him (for he certainly could not), but as an appropriate accompaniment to his salutation.

"'I have no doubt, my dears,' said Mr. Pecksniff, feigning to point out other beauties with his hand, 'that this is the proprietor. I should be glad to know him. It might lead to something. Is he looking this way, Charity?'

"'He is opening the window, pa.'

"'Ha, ha!' cried Mr. Pecksniff, softly. 'All right! He has found I'm professional. He heard me inside just now, I have no doubt. Don't look! With regard to the fluted pillars in the portico, my dears——'

"'Hallo!' cried the gentleman.

"'Sir, your servant,' said Mr. Pecksniff, taking off his hat. 'I am proud to make your acquaintance.'

"'Come off the grass, will you!' roared the gentleman.

"'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Mr. Pecksniff, doubtful of his having heard aright. 'Did you——?'

"'Come off the grass!' repeated the gentleman, warmly.

"'We are unwilling to intrude, sir,' Mr. Pecksniff smilingly began.

"'But you *are* intruding,' returned the other, 'unwarrantably intruding. Trespassing. You see a gravel walk, don't you? What do you think it's meant for? Open the gate there! Show that party out!'"

A scene of a different character, in which some home-truths, very pertinent to the purpose of this enterprise, are addressed by Tom Pinch to this same fiery magnate, must also be quoted:—

"'When you tell me,' said Tom, 'that my sister has no innate power of commanding the respect of your children, I must tell you it is not so; and that she has. She is as well-bred, as well-taught, as well-qualified by nature to command respect, as any hirer of a governess you know. But when you place her at a disadvantage in reference to every servant in your house, how can you suppose, if you have the gift of common-sense, that she is not in a tenfold worse position in reference to your daughters?'

"'Pretty well! Upon my word,' exclaimed the gentleman, 'this is pretty well!'

"'It is very ill, sir,' said Tom. 'It is very bad and mean, and wrong and cruel. Respect! . . . Put anything the most deserving of respect before your daughters in the light in which you place her, and you will bring it down as low, no matter what it is. . . . Why, how can you, as an honest gentleman, profess displeasure or surprise at your daughter telling my sister she is something beggarly and humble, when you are forever telling her the same thing yourself in fifty plain, out-speaking ways, though not in words; and when your very porter and footman make the same delicate announcement to all comers? As to your suspicion and distrust of her, even of her word; if she is not above their reach, you have no right to employ her.'

" 'No right!' cried the brass-and-copper founder.

" 'Distinctly not,' Tom answered. 'If you imagine that the payment of an annual sum of money gives it to you, you immensely exaggerate its power and value. Your money is the least part of your bargain in such a case. You may be punctual in that to half a second on the clock, and yet be Bankrupt. . . .'"

And these are but two of the numberless instances that might be cited from *Martin Chuzzlewit* in which Dickens's enlarged vision seizes on the sorry substance that goes to the making of so much of the material of our civilization and tears it into rags of ridicule. M. Taine held rightly that in this novel Dickens evinced a grip and a force and a wide comprehension that shook the sawdust out of certain shoddy human types as it had never been shaken out before. Throughout, alike in its delineation of Mrs. Gamp and her unholy sisterhood, at once one of the most droll and richly whimsical, and at the same time one of the most incisively scathing of Dickens's portraits; in its creation, in Todgers's, of a little compact world, with an atmosphere and a living coterie of its own, all complete, the whole alight with humour and delicately shaded with the drab of a squalid reality; and in its fidelity to truth in its varied presentment of still new and fresh London types and scenes, it is one of the sanest—and so one of the most conclusive—of Dickens's books; and, despite the looseness of its construction, the improbability of one of its secondary themes of interest, and other inevitable faults, it is one of the most satisfying.

CHAPTER VII

"DOMBEY AND SON"

I

IT has always seemed to the present writer that Dickens missed one of the chances of his career in *Dombey and Son*. Everything was in his favour when he wrote it. A train of the best possible conditions had been laid by circumstance, such as should have resulted in a veritable masterpiece. And a masterpiece was projected. It was by the faults of its execution that the promise of the original scheme failed of its due fulfilment.

Two years had elapsed since Dickens completed *Martin Chuzzlewit*: a blessed breathing-space during which he had travelled much and seen much, in Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, not as a mere tourist, flying erratically from spot to spot, resting nowhere and assimilating nothing, huddling together in his memory a medley of confused and blurred impressions of strange scenes and alien peoples; but an orderly progression from country to country, riveted into a coherent mass of intimate information by prolonged residence in such central and representative districts and towns as Lausanne, Genoa, and Paris. He was in his thirty-fifth year when he started on *Dombey and Son*, and had at last begun to realize to the full his responsibilities, to himself and to his conscience, as well as to his readers and his art generally. He had now grown to a proper sense of the importance

of the position he held and the influence he wielded as the most popular English writer of his own, or indeed any former, time. And this consciousness inspired him to essay greater heights of achievement than any he had previously contemplated. He felt that he must deal with larger issues than any that had yet engaged his talents and plan his future work on a grander and more ample scale altogether. He had passed out of a glorious novitiate into the acknowledged and assured kingdom of the master. His experimental period was finally closed and over. He was no longer on any sort of probation. It only remained for him to take up the sacred charge imposed upon him by his unprecedented and unparalleled success and to prove himself worthy of it.

And there seemed to be nothing to hinder him, provided that he was all he confidently, and with reason, believed himself to be. There were no disturbing outside influences to cramp his elbow. He had had plenty of time in which to reconnoitre and marshal all his forces of mind; he had attained to the prime of his manhood; he had good health and superabundant vitality; he was still young enough to retain all the zestful enthusiasm of his youth and just old enough to have learnt how to discipline and hold in check his ripening genius. The monetary difficulties that had harassed and vexed him during the writing of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and the disappointments that had grieved and irked him during the progress of that book were swept away by the immediate and enhanced popularity that his new enterprise won; a popularity that recalled the old buoyant days of *Pickwick*, without its attendant evils of a straitened reward and the worry of having to work at inordinate high pressure to discharge a number of ill-considered obligations which his own rash undertakings had involved him in. "His accounts for the first half-year of *Dombey* were so much in excess

of what had been expected from the new publishing arrangements that from this date all embarrassments connected with money were brought to a close. His future profits varied of course with his varying sales, but there was always enough, and savings were now to begin." He writes in rare high feather: "The profits of the half-year are brilliant. Deducting the hundred pounds a month, paid six times, I have still to receive £2,220, which I think is tidy." Again: "The *Dombey* sale is BRILLIANT! I have put before me thirty thousand as the limit of the most extreme success, saying that if we could reach that, I should be more than satisfied, and more than happy; you will judge how happy I am!" As he had good cause to be, indeed.

Yet, despite the tangible benefits, as well as the huge self-satisfaction, that this success conferred on him; and despite his late familiar contact with other nations and the jostling that his bright receptive intellect must surely have undergone against the entirely new ideas that dominate foreign peoples, and the enormously bracing and broadening effect such experiences might be expected to have upon his mental outlook, it does not appear that they had at all softened his materialism, or even stripped him of much of his insularity and chauvinism. For thus he writes, in a letter from Paris:—

"It is extraordinary what nonsense English people talk, write, and believe about foreign countries. The Swiss (so much decried) will do anything for you, if you are frank and civil; they are attentive and punctual in all their dealings; and may be relied upon as steadily as the English. The Parisian workpeople and smaller shopkeepers are more like (and unlike) Americans than I could have supposed possible. To the American indifference and carelessness they add a procrastination and a want of the least heed about keeping a pro-

mise, or being exact, which is certainly not surpassed in Naples. They have the American semi-sentimental independence too, and none of the American vigour or purpose. If ever they get free trade in France (as I suppose they will, one day) these parts of the population must, for years and years, be ruined. They couldn't get the means of existence, in competition with the English workmen. Their inferior manual dexterity, their lazy habits, perfect unreliability, and habitual subordination would ruin them in any such contest instantly. They are fit for nothing but soldiering. . ."

No doubt Dickens imagined that he was showing the greatest liberality of mind in making these pronouncements; but to the judicial they must seem a most pitiable manifestation of the inherent weakness of one section of his judgment, in that they betray him as guilty of having accepted and shared in the ignorant prejudices that invariably animate the unthinking and uneducated inhabitants of one country against the inhabitants of another. The truth is that Dickens had that soft elastic temperament which receives impressions readily enough, but only retains them for a little while and then returns to its original shape. He might almost be likened to a hollow gutta-percha ball which is first cast in a mould and fashioned for all time; which can afterwards be manipulated into many and various forms so long as it is firmly handled, but which invariably, so soon as the pressure is removed, becomes a smooth, round, impermeable ball again. This intrinsically buoyant quality is strikingly exemplified in a curious complaint that Dickens makes in another of his letters. In effect, he says "I am held so fast that I cannot bounce, as it is my nature to."

"The difficulty of going at what I call a rapid pace is prodigious; it is almost an impossibility. I suppose this is partly the effect of two years' ease, and partly

of the absence of streets and numbers of figures. I can't express how much I want these. It seems as if they supplied something to my brain, which it cannot bear, when busy, to lose. For a week or a fortnight I can work prodigiously in a retired place (as at Broadstairs) and a day in London sets me up again and starts me. But the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern is Immense ! ! . . . *My* figures seem to stagnate without crowds about them. I wrote very little in Genoa (only *The Chimes*) and fancied myself conscious of some such influence there—but Lord ! I had two miles of streets, at least, lighted at night, to walk about in and a great theatre to repair to, every night. . . . The absence of any accessible streets continues to worry me " (he writes later), " now that I have so much to do, in a most singular manner. It is quite a little mental phenomenon. I should not walk in them in the daytime, if they were here, I daresay ; but at night I want them beyond description. I don't seem to be able to get rid of my spectres, unless I can lose them in the crowds."

The secret of this strange restless longing probably lies in the fact, already remarked, that Dickens was essentially a creature of his environment. He craved for the hurry and bustle, the light and noise of the streets, because he had been bred, and his art had been mainly nurtured, in them ; and because he was a man who loved the things he was used to. There were things that he was used to that he did not love, of course ; but he had usually no idea of seeking a remedy for them except among other things that he was equally used to.

II

How, then, did Dickens enter upon this great task that he had set himself in *Dombey and Son ?* The book " was to do with Pride what its predecessor had

done with Selfishness." But Selfishness had proved itself to be too large and diffuse a theme for any adequate and exhaustive treatment in one book; since it can be said that Selfishness is the root of all evil far more truthfully than that money is. *Martin Chuzzlewit* had only succeeded in its exploitation of one phase of Selfishness, as typified in the figure of Pecksniff, whilst it had lamentably failed in the cases of both young and old Martin. But now Dickens designed to write a prose epic on the Vice of Pride, which is yet only another outcrop from that same root, Selfishness. And it may be said that if he had died before he had quite finished *Dombey and Son* it might have been thought that he was in the direct way of accomplishing his purpose. For, though devoted Dickensians protest and his biographers expound and explain, the book is spoilt by its conclusion, wherein a violent and unnatural change takes place in its stiff and stubborn central figure and he is reduced to a condition of amiable dotage. If it be true, as his apologists urge, that Dickens all along meant that Mr. Dombey should relent at the end and come to see the vanity of his lifelong creed, then is the author's case only the less gracious; and his labour is lost in tricking out a wax-effigy, that melts in the sun-glare of sane criticism, with the complexion and all the other outward similitudes of a living man.

Let us see. "Dombey and Son. . . . Those three words conveyed the one idea of Mr. Dombey's life. The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre. Common abbreviations took new meanings in his eyes and had

sole reference to them : A.D. had no concern with anno Domini, but stood for anno Dombei—and Son. . . .

" Mr. Dombey's young child was, from the beginning, so distinctly important to him as a part of his own greatness, or (which is the same thing) of the greatness of Dombey and Son, that there is no doubt his parental affection might have been easily traced, like many a goodly superstructure of fair fame, to a very low foundation. But he loved his son with all the love he had. If there were a warm place in his frosty heart, his son occupied it ; if its very hard surface could receive the impression of any image, the image of that son was there ; though not so much as an infant, or as a boy, but as a grown man—the ' Son ' of the Firm. Therefore he was impatient to advance into the future, and to hurry over the intervening passages of his history. Therefore he had little or no anxiety about them, in spite of his love ; feeling as if the boy had a charmed life, and *must* become the man with whom he held such constant communication in his thoughts, and for whom he planned and projected, as for an existing reality, every day. . . .

" ' Papa ! what's money ? ' (asks little Paul).

" ' What is money, Paul ? ' (says his father). ' Money ? ' . . . Mr. Dombey was in a difficulty. He would have liked to give him some explanation, involving the terms circulating-medium, currency, depreciation of currency, paper, bullion, rates of exchange, value of precious metals in the market, and so forth ; but looking down at the little chair, and seeing what a long way down it was, he answered : ' Gold, and silver, and copper. Guineas, shillings, halfpence. You know what they are ? '

" ' Oh, yes, I know what they are,' said Paul. ' I don't mean that, Papa. I mean what's money after all ? '

" ' What is money after all ! ' said Mr. Dombey,

backing his chair a little, that he might the better gaze in sheer amazement at the presumptuous atom that propounded such an inquiry.

" ' I mean, Papa, what can it do ? ' returned Paul. . . .

" ' You'll know better by-and-by, my man. . . . Money, Paul, can do anything. . . .'

" ' Anything, Papa ? '

" ' Yes. Anything—almost,' said Mr. Dombey.

" ' Anything means everything, don't it, Papa ? . . .'

" ' It includes it ; yes,' said Mr. Dombey.

" ' Why didn't money save me my Mamma ? ' returned the child. ' It isn't cruel, is it ? '

" ' Cruel ! . . . No. A good thing can't be cruel.'

" ' If it's a good thing, and can do anything,' said the little fellow thoughtfully . . . ' I wonder why it didn't save me my Mamma. . . .'

" Mr. Dombey having recovered from his surprise . . . expounded to him how that money, though a very potent spirit, never to be disparaged on any account whatever, could not keep people alive whose time was come to die ; and how that we must all die, unfortunately, even in the City, though we were never so rich. But how that money caused us to be honoured, feared, respected, courted, and admired, and made us powerful and glorious in the eyes of all men ; and how that it could, very often, even keep off death for a long time together. . . .

" ' And you see, Paul,' he added (on another occasion), ' how powerful money is, and how anxious people are to get it. Young Gay comes all this way to beg for money, and you, who are so grand and great, having got it, are going to let him have it, as a great favour and obligation. . . .' "

Presently we are shown the Nemesis that waits on that unworthy pride which is based on wealth and self-sufficiency.

" Who wears such armour too bears with him even

another heavy retribution. It is of proof against conciliation, love, and confidence! against all gentle sympathy from without, all trust, all tenderness, all soft emotion; but to deep stabs in the self-love, it is as vulnerable as the bare breast to steel; and such tormenting festers rankle there, as follow on no other wounds, no, though dealt with the mailed hand of Pride itself, on weaker pride, disarmed and thrown down. . . ."

And when the first heavy blow falls, and the hapless victim of his own inordinate lustful pride is made to eat the dust of his defeat at the hands of the woman whom he had taken to wife that she might add her own native stock of pride to his, and so serve its further aggrandisement, Dickens is moved to this reflection :—

"Was Mr. Dombey's master-vice, that ruled him so inexorably, an unnatural characteristic? It might be worth while sometimes to inquire what Nature is, and how men work to change her, and whether, in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural. Coop any son or daughter of our mighty mother within narrow range, and bind the prisoner to one idea, and foster it by servile worship of it on the part of the few timid or designing people standing round, and what is nature to the willing captive who has never risen up upon the wings of a free mind—drooping and useless soon—to see her in her comprehensive truth!

"Alas! are there so few things in the world about us most unnatural, and yet most natural in being so! Hear the magistrate or judge admonish the unnatural outcasts of society; unnatural in brutal habits, unnatural in want of decency, unnatural in losing and confounding all distinctions between good and evil; unnatural in ignorance, in vice, in recklessness, in contumacy, in mind, in looks, in everything. But follow the good clergyman or doctor, who, with his life imperilled at every breath he draws, goes down into their dens, lying within the echoes of our carriage wheels

and daily tread upon the pavement stones. Look around upon the world of odious sights—millions of immortal creatures have no other world on earth—at the lightest mention of which humanity revolts, and dainty delicacy, living in the next street, stops her ears and lisps 'I don't believe it!' Breathe the polluted air, foul with every impurity that is poisonous to health and life; and have every sense, conferred upon our race for its delight and happiness, offended, sickened, and disgusted, and made a channel by which misery and death alone can enter. Vainly attempt to think of any single plant or flower, or wholesome weed that, set in this fetid bed, could have its natural growth, or put its little leaves off to the sun as God designed it. And then, calling up some ghastly child, with stunted form and wicked face, hold forth on its unnatural sinfulness, and lament its being so early far away from Heaven—but think a little of its having been conceived, and born and bred, in Hell.

"Those who study the physical sciences, and bring them to bear upon the health of Man, tell us that if the noxious particles that rise from vitiated air were palpable to the sight, we should see them lowering in a dense black cloud above such haunts, and rolling slowly on to corrupt the better portions of a town. But if the moral pestilence that rises with them, and in the eternal laws of outraged Nature is inseparable from them, could be made discernible too, how terrible the revelation! Then should we see depravity, impiety, drunkenness, theft, murder, and a long train of nameless sins against the natural affections and repulsions of mankind, overhanging the devoted spots, and creeping on to blight the innocent and spread contagion among the pure. Then should we see how the same poisoned fountains that flow into our hospitals and lazar-houses inundate the gaols and make the convict ships swim deep, and roll across the seas, and overrun vast continents with

crime. Then should we stand appalled to know that where we generate disease to strike our children down and entail itself on unborn generations, there also we breed, by the same certain process, infancy that knows no innocence, youth without modesty or shame, maturity that is mature in nothing but suffering and guilt, blasted old age that is a scandal on the form we bear. Unnatural humanity! When we shall gather grapes from thorns and figs from thistles; when fields of grain shall spring up from the offal in the byeways of our wicked cities, and roses bloom in the fat churchyards that they cherish; then we may look for natural humanity and find it growing from such seed.

"O for a good spirit who would take the housetops off, with a more potent and benignant hand than the tame demon in the tale, and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel as he moves forth among them! For only one night's view of the pale phantoms rising from the scenes of our too-long neglect, and from the thick and sullen air where Vice and Fever propagate together, raining the tremendous social retributions which are ever pouring down, and ever coming thicker! Bright and blest the morning that should rise on such a night; for men, delayed no more by stumbling-blocks of their own making, which are but specks of dust upon the path between them and eternity, would then apply themselves, like creatures of one common origin, owing one duty to the Father of one family, and tending to one common end —to make the world a better place.

"Not the less bright and blest would that day be for rousing some who never have looked out upon the world of human life around them, to a knowledge of their own relation to it, and for making them acquainted with a perversion of nature in their own contracted sympathies and estimates; as great and yet as natural

in its development when once begun, as the lowest degradation known.

"But no such day ever dawned on Mr. Dombey or his wife; and the course of each was taken."

And when the final catastrophe comes, when he is beaten down and ruined, and the props of his pride are shattered and broken, then

"Though he hide the world within him from the world without—which he believes has but one purpose for the time, and that, to watch him eagerly wherever he goes—he cannot hide those rebel traces of it, which escape in hollow eyes and cheeks, a haggard forehead, and a moody brooding air. Impenetrable as before, he is still an altered man; and, proud as ever, he is humbled, or those marks would not be there.

"The world. What the world thinks of him, how it looks at him, what it sees in him, and what it says—this is the haunting demon of his mind. It is everywhere where he is; and, worse than that, it is everywhere where he is not. It comes out with him among his servants, and yet he leaves it whispering behind; he sees it pointing after him in the street; it is waiting for him in his counting-house; it leers over the shoulders of rich men among the merchants; it goes beckoning and babbling among the crowd; it always anticipates him in every place; and is always busiest, he knows, when he has gone away. When he is shut up in his room at night, it is in his house, outside it, audible in footsteps on the pavement, visible in print upon the table, streaming to and fro on railroads and in ships—restless and busy everywhere, with nothing else but him."

Frankly this penultimate phase of Dombey contents us vastly more than that last phase in which he sits and recalls the past, hungering for the love that he has cast aside and the happiness he has rejected. But even that sorry spectacle might pass and leave us satisfied,

if the book did but close upon that note; if Dickens had but killed Mr. Dombey, then and there, and so made a fitting and a plausible—ay, and a dramatic end of him, once for all. The book, then, would have been, by many pages of feeble anti-climax, the better and the stronger. For the character of Mr. Dombey is well conceived and consistently rendered—until that final catastrophe takes place, when he sinks upon banality and ineptitude. Nevertheless, the book endures, if only for its study of this stiff-necked man, by virtue of the high moral it enshrines and its indignant repudiation of such a type as being in any way an admirable one. It must endure for its exposure of the folly and the wickedness of unrighteous pride and its inimitable setting-forth of the truth that if a man have only money, then he is indeed the poorest of all God's creatures.

III

Among the minor characters in *Dombey and Son*, however, there are several that are entirely engaging and delightful, alike for their fidelity to truth and for their innate pleasing qualities. And perhaps the best of them all, in the former regard, is the study of Rob the Grinder.

Something has already been said in an early chapter concerning the scope and aim of Charity Schools, as proclaimed publicly to the world by one of their warmest advocates and supporters. Noah Claypole, in *Oliver Twist*, was one specimen of the product of these schools. In Rob the Grinder we have another of the results, more finished and more probable still, of that baneful system of education. Mr. Dombey himself is mainly instrumental in the undoing of Mrs. Toodle's hapless first-born, though he acted in all good faith, misled by his own arrogant ignorance and the representations of his sister, Mrs. Chick. Says he, in his lofty way :—

"'I am far from being friendly . . . to what is called, by people of levelling sentiments, general education. But it is necessary that the inferior classes should continue to be taught to know their position, and to conduct themselves properly. So far I approve of schools. Having the power of nominating a child on the foundation of an ancient establishment, called (from a worshipful company) the Charitable Grinders; where not only is a wholesome education bestowed upon the scholars, but where a dress and badge is likewise provided for them; I have (first communicating, through Mrs. Chick, with your family) nominated your eldest son to an existing vacancy; and he has this day, I am informed, assumed the habit. The number of her son, I believe,' said Mr. Dombey, turning to his sister and speaking of the child as if he were a hackney-coach, 'is one hundred and forty-seven. Louisa, you can tell her.'

"'One hundred and forty-seven,' said Mrs. Chick. 'The dress, Richards, is a nice, warm, blue baize tailed coat and cap, turned up with orange-coloured binding, red worsted stockings, and very strong leather smallclothes. One might wear the articles one's self,' said Mrs. Chick with enthusiasm, 'and be grateful. . . .' A vision of Biler as a Charitable Grinder, with his very small legs encased in the serviceable clothing described by Mrs. Chick, swam before Richards's eyes, and made them water."

But

"Now it happened that poor Biler's life had been . . . rendered weary by the costume of the Charitable Grinders. The youth of the streets could not endure it. No young vagabond could be brought to bear its contemplation for one moment, without throwing himself upon the unoffending wearer, and doing him a mischief. His social existence had been more like that of an early Christian than an innocent child of the nine-

teenth century. He had been stoned in the streets. He had been overthrown into gutters; bespattered with mud; violently flattened against posts. Entire strangers to his person had lifted his yellow cap off his head and cast it to the winds. His legs had not only undergone verbal criticisms and revilings, but had been handled and pinched. That very morning he had received a perfectly unsolicited black eye on his way to the Grinders' establishment, and had been punished for it by the master, a superannuated old Grinder of savage disposition, who had been appointed schoolmaster because he didn't know anything, and wasn't fit for anything, and for whose cruel cane all chubby little boys had a perfect fascination."

The inevitable outcome of this treatment is pithily summed up by poor Biler's father, in talk with Mr. Dombey.

"'Beg your pardon, sir. . . . I wouldn't have troubled you with such a pint except as a way of gettin' in the name of my son Biler—christened Robin—him as you was so good as to make a Charitable Grinder on.'

"'Well, man . . . what about him?'

"'Why, sir . . . I'm forced to say, sir, that he's gone wrong.'

"'He has gone wrong, has he?' said Mr. Dombey, with a hard kind of satisfaction.

"'He has fell into bad company, you see, genelmen,' pursued the father, looking wistfully at both, and evidently taking the Major into the conversation with the hope of having his sympathy. 'He has got into bad ways. God send he may come to again, genelmen, but he's on the wrong track now. You could hardly be off hearing of it somehow, sir,' said Toodle, again addressing Mr. Dombey individually; 'and it's better I should out and say my boy's gone rather wrong. Polly's dreadful down about it, genelmen. . . .'

" ' A son of this man's whom I caused to be educated, Major,' said Mr. Dombey. . . . ' The usual return ! '

" ' Take advice from plain old Joe, and never educate that sort of people, sir,' returned the Major. ' Damme, sir, it never does ! It always fails ! ' "

There could be but one result from such a training, and it is forthcoming—as we see in this conversation between Rob and Miss Tox ; in which he has whined and canted his way into her high opinion :—

" ' I am quite glad,' said Miss Tox, '. . . to know you. I hope you'll consider me your friend, and that you'll come and see me as often as you like. Do you keep a money-box ? '

" ' Yes, ma'am,' returned Rob ; ' I'm saving up against I've got enough to put in the Bank, ma'am.'

" ' Very laudable, indeed,' said Miss Tox. ' I'm glad to hear it. Put this half-crown into it, if you please.'

" ' Oh, thank you, ma'am,' replied Rob, ' but really I couldn't think of depriving you.'

" ' I commend your independent spirit,' said Miss Tox, ' but it's no deprivation, I assure you. I shall be offended if you don't take it, as a mark of my good-will. Good-night, Robin.'

" ' Good night, ma'am,' said Rob, ' and thank you.'

" Who ran sniggering off to get change, and tossed it away with a pieman. But they never taught honour at the Grinders' School, where the system that prevailed was particularly strong in the engendering of hypocrisy. Insomuch that many of the friends and masters of past Grinders said, if this were what came of education for the common people, let us have none. Some more rational said, let us have a better one. But the governing powers of the Grinders' Company were always ready for them, by picking out a few boys who had turned out well, in spite of the system, and roundly asserting that they could only have turned out well because of it. Which settled the business of those objectors out of

hand, and established the glory of the Grinders' Institution."

A more ingratiating character is Captain Cuttle, whom some would dub a caricature; but whom I aver I have known in the flesh, as a breathing, speaking personality. And I might add that I have no use for the word "gentleman," if this old sailor and all his noble tribe are not of the true breed. Words fail to do even the scantiest and most meagre justice to the charm of Captain Cuttle's delicate chivalry and simple integrity, so deftly and so lightly, so tenderly and so humorously, limned in for our everlasting admiration and entertainment by Dickens.

And Toots, also—inarticulate, fond Toots—Dr. Blimber's overblown head pupil who, fallen into the bestial society of the Game Chicken and his horrible crew of bullies and sharpers and mumpers, yet preserves himself wholly spotless from any contamination: Toots is another of the gentlemen whom Dickens could draw to the life. As Major Bagstock is another, of the type which it is said he could not draw, and certainly could not—to the liking of its accepted representatives, whose literature is the *Pink 'Un*, whose language is of the stable and the pothouse, and whose morals are of the dung-heap. . . . But this belongs to a later chapter.

There remains of *Dombey and Son* much that still comes within the legitimate scope of this review. There are the twin-figures of Good Mrs. Brown's outcast daughter and Mrs. Skewton's, hardly quite realized, perhaps, but eloquently suggestive and bodeful of a common tragedy. There is Susan Nipper; there are Mr. and Mrs. Chick, Mrs. Wickam and Mrs. Pipchin; and—there is Miss Tox, most meek and faithful and single-minded of sycophants, who, if she fawned and flattered, only did so out of the innate gentleness and humility of her heart and not for any ulterior advantage to herself. One can love and respect poor Miss Tox

whilst yet loathing toadyism and snobbery in its more crude and gross forms, as all good democrats of necessity must; because in Miss Tox Dickens has shown us that though the soul of good in simple beings may be corrupted for a while by contact with evil associations of pride and arrogance and intolerance, it can never be destroyed or rendered despicable so long as the truer nature to which it belongs remains sweet and kind; and so, by his exercise of a fine Christian charity Dickens contrives, somehow, to gild her very failings and to make them radiant with the beauty of a real wholesome pathos, as distinct from the vamped-up maudlin sentimentality that disfigures so much of the earlier portions of the book.

CHAPTER VIII

"DAVID COPPERFIELD"

I

"OF all my books I like this the best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is David Copperfield."

Thus writes Dickens in his preface to this book, which the world has elected to acclaim as his masterpiece, contrary to the common usage in such matters. For what an author generally ranks as the highest among his achievements is seldom accepted by the world as such. But it is not the intention of the present writer to quarrel with the popular verdict. Of all the novels that Dickens wrote *David Copperfield* undoubtedly embodies the most complete exposition of his many-sided genius in its best, and maybe its worst, manifestations. It would be a great book in any literature. Divested of its humour (as it is in its French translation) it stands forth as a novel which any nation, however great its literary traditions—and, after all, there are none greater than the English—might justly place among the very best of its fiction. It was the supreme expression of the author's personality—as an artist, as one of the most popular of writers of any age or country, and as a man of a peculiarly sympathetic and emotional temperament. Dickens was prepared to stake his

reputation on this book, and to stand or fall by the final judgment passed upon it. The book has survived that drastic test and stands higher to-day in the estimation of all men qualified to voice an opinion upon it than ever it did, perhaps. Even at the risk of seeming somewhat wearisomely reiterative, it is necessary that it should be considered here in all seriousness as an important—one of the most important—contributions to English literature.

Because: if it is not a great novel, and Dickens were not one of the greatest of novelists, then the case that I would make out falls to pieces. Dickens is a valuable asset to Socialism just in so far as he is great. If his work be of little account (as some aver), if his place among authors be that of a mere mediocrity, then is our joy in him as (possibly) an unconscious adherent to the cause that this book is primarily written to further and advance, so much the more diminished. It was to prove Dickens a Socialist in all but the name that I engaged on this present enterprise. My critical opinion in regard to him as an author does not matter very much, and I am not anxious to expound it. I fancy—and this seems the place to say so—that I am as fully aware of his limitations as most other critics who know as much of the life he depicted as I do; though it may be that because he was a man after my own heart I am therefore the less competent to judge him impartially. I repeat that I shared in many similar experiences to those which befell him as a child and as a youth. I can even conceive, to be blatantly honest, that in happier circumstances than those which have shaped me, I might have won a little of his fame. I am even audacious enough to hope that I may yet secure a lowly niche in his corner of the white temple, if only as one of his disciples and followers. It is the fashion to indulge in comparative criticism nowadays, and so I am not likely to be deluded into believing what

some critics have told me when they said that the hem of his mantle has sometimes fallen upon me; but I know that as he saw the world, in his ample and comprehensive way, so I also see it with my more dim and restricted vision. I can only grope where he walked boldly; I can only fumble at what he handled with the consummate ease of a giant's strength and the confidence of a master-craftsman. Nevertheless, I feel that in my purblind and halting fashion I have here and there laid hold on some of the same truths of human nature that he made radiantly manifest, and that only my lack—a mighty lack!—of the power that lifted him to the heights where he stands, keeps me at their base. I believe that I know the way, that I falter at the beginning of the paths by which he mounted; but I want the courage and the hardihood and the length of his stride that could take him to his goal. If this reads presumptuously or immodestly it is because I have expressed what I feel and think, and not because I have the least desire to glorify myself, or to claim affinity with the genius of Charles Dickens. In the course of a crowded and rather hard life that has not yet touched the meridian of the average mortal span I have found myself so often in the way with Dickens that to disclaim all kinship with him would be to stultify the purpose I have set before me and to sacrifice to a mawkish diffidence which is not native in me, the object I desire above all things to attain. I am aware that I do not matter much. I have already said so. I do not even imagine that I can matter a good deal to anyone who shall read these pages. Moreover, I do not desire that I should, except as one claiming to write of this High Priest of Humanism as a devout acolyte who has studied at his knees and eagerly done his best to con his lessons with understanding, so that I might apply them in the only directions that are open to me. I would not, merely for my own enlargement,

be such a dolt as to obtrude my own individuality between my reader and my subject. But I feel that I must make plain in unmistakable terms what I hold to be the fact: That I am in some definite degree able to enter into the spirit of Dickens's work as few men seem to have done who have hitherto written about him.

II

As might be expected, *David Copperfield* is not one of the books that best serve the purpose of these labours. No great work of art is ever didactic. If it teaches us anything it does so by indirect methods that usually elude analysis, and so the application of its moral is not readily to be found in any isolated extracts from its pages. One might as well try to arrive at the beauty of a cathedral by going over its walls with a microscope as seek to expound the purpose of a work of art by exhibiting specimens chipped out of its body. *David Copperfield* is thus, inevitably, of all Dickens's books the least amenable to any hard-and-fast rules or any cut-and-dried methods of treatment. It does not adapt itself easily to any set formula or fall into the scale of any plan, however well drawn up. Dickens had gained immensely in knowledge and mastery of the literary craft between the time when he wrote *Dombey and Son* and when he wrote *David Copperfield*. The trouble with the former book was to know what to reject; the trouble with this is to select any material at all that is in any way suitable to the end I have in view, short of an epitome of the entire novel. I am in the position of Dickens himself when he says, That all he could have said of the story to any purpose he has endeavoured to say in it. There is often a wealth of meaning in a paucity of words.

It has been shown—and is now common knowledge—that *David Copperfield* is in part autobiographical.

But it is not so in the sense that it describes very many of Dickens's own experiences; it describes very few. It is autobiographical in that larger sense which implies a good deal of intimate self-revelation. The character of David is clearly and definitely portrayed only up to that point where he becomes a man and puts away childish things for good and all; then it fades into a filmy abstraction, becomes a somewhat amorphous, nebulous thing, as it were, whose views and feelings are consciously impersonal, and detached from the life that it rather contemplates than actively participates in, seeming to partake of the nature of a philosophic nonentity, remote from the heat and strife and clamour of everyday human beings, living in some rarefied atmosphere far beyond the reach of mundane passion and sensation and prejudice. A kind of shyness seems to beset the author as he finds the character of his hero developing a closer and closer resemblance to his own, so that he is afflicted with a constraining diffidence which impels him to withdraw him from his central position in the narrative and transform him into a mere looker-on. It is perhaps for this reason that *David Copperfield* seems to be a little too long, and that our interest in the concluding chapters is whittled down until it depends solely on such dramatic episodes as that of the shipwreck in which Ham sacrifices his own life in a vain attempt to save that of his enemy.

But in all the passages that precede the moment of David's first marriage the book is vibrant with a vital force of reality. David, as the child, the boy, the youth; the pampered pet of his girl-mother and his doting nurse, the infant lover of Little Em'ly, the ill-used, suffering victim of his stepfather's cold dislike, the despised and rejected orphan, the poor drudge defrauded of his rightful share of childish happiness, the tenderly nurtured and well-cared-for son by adoption of the delightful Betsy Trotwood, and the gallant and spirited

young man fighting for his place in the world that he may repay his staunch kind guardian's devotion and win the girl-wife in whom we see reflected the pretty foolishness of his own mother: in all these, David is, to one reader at least, a living breathing fellow-mortal, wholly lovable and companionable, as well in his weakness as in his strength and in the innocent folly of his nonage as in the austere, unembittered wisdom of his maturity.

We have seen how the experiences of the fictional David Copperfield during the period of his servitude to Messrs. Murdstone and Grinby, form a close parallel to the experiences of the real Charles Dickens in the blacking factory. In the chapters that describe these experiences is contained all that the book has to offer us of authentic autobiography. The remainder is rather a dream of what-might-have-been than a transcript from actuality. And, indeed, in this aspect *David Copperfield* is very representative of all Dickens's best work, which is invariably in the vein of a fairy romance woven into a seemly pattern out of the most commonplace and threadbare textures. The main story is a simple one, thinly constructed, lacking in most of the elements of drama; formless, inchoate; but grafted upon this central theme are a number of tributary themes, revolving about more or less subsidiary characters, which make the book one of the most broadly interesting and exhilarating of all Dickens's novels.

There is the tragedy of Little Em'ly and Steerforth; she, the spoilt darling of a circle of rude fisherfolk; he, not less the spoilt darling of his proud and fond fine-lady mother. The spirit of fierce antagonism which divides the upper from the lower classes—and must divide them until all such arbitrary distinctions cease to be—and which separates them by so many leagues of misunderstanding and misconception, has rarely been better exemplified than in the respective attitudes of the

deserted, dispossessed widow, Mrs. Steerforth, and the bereaved Mr. Peggotty, toward the tragedy that has ruined the homes and frustrated the hopes of them both. The interrogative Rosa Dartle starts this significant train of suggestion when she requests to be informed

"'Oh, but, really? Do tell me. Are they, though? . . .'

"'Are they what? And are who what?' said Steerforth.

"'That sort of people. Are they really animals and clods, and beings of another order? I want to know *so* much.'

"'Why, there's a pretty wide separation between them and us," said Steerforth, with indifference. 'They are not to be expected to be as sensitive as we are. Their delicacy is not to be shocked or hurt very easily. They are wonderfully virtuous, I dare say. Some people contend for that, at least; and I am sure I don't want to contradict them. But they have not very fine natures, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded.'"

The same old problem is further stated from the two opposing points of view in the following passages:—

"'A most engaging little Beauty!' said Steerforth. '. . . Well! It's a quaint place and they are quaint company; and it's quite a new sensation to mix with them.'

"'How fortunate we are, too,' I returned, 'to have arrived to witness their happiness in that intended marriage! I never saw people so happy. How delightful to see it, and to be made the sharers in their honest joy, as we have been!'

"'That's rather a chuckle-headed fellow for the girl; isn't he?' said Steerforth."

Again, in the interview between Steerforth's mother and Little Em'ly's uncle:—

"'Please to read that, ma'am. That's my niece's

hand. . . . "Unless he brings me back a lady,"' said Mr. Peggotty, tracing out that part with his finger. 'I come to know, ma'am, whether he will keep his wured?'

"'No,' she returned.

"'Why not?' said Mr. Peggotty.

"'It is impossible. He would disgrace himself. You cannot fail to know that she is far below him.'

"'Raise her up,' said Mr. Peggotty.

"'She is uneducated and ignorant.'

"'Maybe she's not; maybe she is,' said Mr. Peggotty. '*I* think not, ma'am; but I'm no judge of them things. Teach her better.'

"'Since you oblige me to speak more plainly, which I am very unwilling to do, her humble connections would render such a thing impossible, if nothing else did.'

"'Hark to this, ma'am,' he returned slowly and quietly. 'You know what it is to love your child. So do I. If she was a hundred times my child, I couldn't love her more. You don't know what it is to lose your child. I do. All the heaps of riches in the wureld would be nowt to me (if they was mine) to buy her back. But save her from this disgrace, and she shall never be disgraced by us. Not one of us that she's grow'd up among, not one of us that's lived along with her, and had her for their all in all, these many year, will ever look upon her pritty face again. We'll be content to let her be; we'll be content to think of her, far off, as if she was underneath another sun and sky; we'll be content to trust her to her husband—to her little children, p'r'aps—and bide the time when all of us shall be alike in quality afore our God! . . .'

"'I justify nothing,' answered the mother. 'I make no counter-accusations. But I am sorry to repeat, it is impossible. Such a marriage would irretrievably blight my son's career, and ruin his prospects. Nothing is more certain than that it can never take place, and never will. If there is any other compensation——'

" ' I am looking at the likeness of the face,' interrupted Mr. Peggotty, with a steady but a kindling eye, ' that has looked at me, in my home, at my fireside, in my boat—wheer not?—smiling and friendly, when it was so treacherous, that I go half wild when I think of it. If the likeness of that face don't turn to burning fire, at the thought of offering money to me for my child's blight and ruin, it's as bad. I doen't know, being a lady's, but what it's worse.'

" . . . An angry flush overspread her features; and she said: '. . . What compensation can you make to me for opening such a pit between me and my son? What is your love to mine? What is your separation to ours? . . . My son, who has been the object of my life, to whom its every thought has been devoted, whom I have gratified from a child in every wish, from whom I have had no separate existence since his birth —to take up in a moment with a miserable girl, and avoid me! To repay my confidence with systematic deception, for her sake, and quit me for her! To set this wretched fancy against his mother's claims upon his duty, love, respect, gratitude—claims that every day and hour of his life should have strengthened into ties that nothing could be proof against! Is this no injury? . . . If he can stake his all upon the lightest object, I can stake my all upon a greater purpose. Let him go where he will, with the means that my love has secured to him. Does he think to reduce me by long absence? He knows his mother very little if he does. Let him put away his whim now, and he is welcome back. Let him not put her away now, and he shall never come near me, living or dying, while I can raise my hand to make a sign against it, unless, being rid of her for ever, he comes humbly to me and begs for my forgiveness. This is my right. This is the acknowledgment I *will have*. This is the separation that there is between us. And is this . . . no injury?' "

Yet again in Rosa Dartle's scornful summary of the situation, and in her subsequent outburst of rage against the girl who has dispossessed her in Steerforth's heart :—

" ' Between these two proud persons, mother and son, there is a wider breach than before, and little hope of its healing, for they are one at heart, and time makes each more obstinate and imperious. . . . This devil whom you make an angel of, I mean this low girl whom he picked out of the tide-mud . . . may be alive—for I believe some common things are hard to die. If she is, you will desire to have a pearl of such price found and taken care of. We desire that, too ; that he may not by any chance be made her prey again. So far, we are united in one interest ; and that is why I, who would do her any mischief that so coarse a wretch is capable of feeling, have sent for you to hear what you have heard.'

" ' I have come to see,' she said, ' James Steerforth's fancy ; the girl who ran away with him, and is the town-talk of the commonest people of her native place ; the bold, flaunting, practised companion of persons like James Steerforth. I want to know what such a thing is like. . . . Stay there ! ' she said, ' or I'll proclaim you to the house, and the whole street ! If you try to evade me, I'll stop you, if it's by the hair, and raise the very stones against you. . . . So ! ' said Rosa Dartle, with a contemptuous laugh, ' I see her at last ! Why, he was a poor creature to be taken by that delicate mock-modesty, and that hanging head ! '

" ' Oh, for Heaven's sake, spare me ! ' exclaimed Emily. ' Whoever you are, you know my pitiable story, and for Heaven's sake, spare me, if you would be spared yourself ! '

" ' If *I* would be spared ! ' returned the other, fiercely ; ' what is there in common between *us*, do you think ? '

" ' Nothing but our sex,' said Emily, with a burst of tears.

" ' And that,' said Rosa Dartle, ' is so strong a claim, preferred by one so infamous, that if I had any feeling in my breast but scorn and abhorrence of you, it would freeze it up. Our sex ! You are an honour to our sex ! ' "

The story of Little Em'ly was not new when Dickens told it ; and it has been told a thousand times since in every conceivable way, almost. But the problem that it involves has never been better stated nor more delicately handled than by Dickens in this book. It is imbued with that quality of fatal necessity which dominates Greek tragedy.

III

In its lighter aspects, also, the book is not less uniformly successful. Dickens never grouped together a more wonderful array of types than he gives us in this book. And hardly one of them is introduced for the sake of achieving any merely literary effect. There is no striving after art for art's sake in *David Copperfield*. Each character has its meaning and its place in the scheme of the book as a whole. Even dismal Mrs. Gummidge, who does so vex us at the outset, is revealed in a more ennobling light later on, when disaster falls upon the old Yarmouth boat. From a " lone, lorn creetur with whom everythink goes contrairy " when the affairs of the household are propitious, she is transformed into a loving, resourceful, heartsome woman, whose superficial ill-humours are at once blown away by the first wind of adversity.

" What a change in Mrs. Gummidge in a little time ! She was another woman. She was so devoted, she had such a quick perception of what it would be well to say, and what it would be well to leave unsaid ; she was so forgetful of herself and so regardful of the sorrow about her, that I held her in a sort of veneration. The work she did that day ! . . . all day long, in toiling

under weights that she was quite unequal to, and fagging to and fro on all sorts of unnecessary errands. As to deploring her misfortunes, she appeared to have entirely lost the recollection of ever having had any. She preserved an equable cheerfulness in the midst of her sympathy, which was not the least astonishing part of the change that had come over her. Querulousness was out of the question. I did not even observe her voice to falter, or a tear to escape from her eyes, the whole day through, until twilight; when she and I and Mr. Peggotty, being alone together, and he having fallen asleep in perfect exhaustion, she broke into a half-suppressed fit of sobbing and crying, and taking me to the door, said: 'Ever bless you, Mas'r Davy, be a friend to him, poor dear!' Then she immediately ran out of the house to wash her face, in order that she might sit quietly beside him, and be found at work there, when he should awake. In short I left her, when I went away at night, the prop and staff of Mr. Peggotty's affliction: and I could not meditate enough upon the lesson that I read in Mrs. Gummidge, and the new experience she unfolded to me."

Here Dickens renders yet one more service to that cause of the mutually helpful, sympathetic poor in which he never grew weary. He was never false to that fine ideal which he did so much to foster and to establish as a tradition; and he never used his art to better purpose than when he held the lamp of his genius aloft that its light might be shed upon the lowly and the rude, and lent to them the lustre of his big-hearted belief in their dignity and nobleness and self-abnegation, their care and solicitude for one another, under the shadow of tribulation and suffering.

By contrast, in his sterner mood, he was ever eager to expose the loathliness of such miserable self-seekers among the poor as Uriah Heep, in such passages as the following:—

"'Ah! But you know we're so very 'umble. . . . And having such a knowledge of our own 'umbleness, we must really take care that we're not pushed to the wall by them as isn't 'umble. . . . Now, confess Master Copperfield, that you haven't liked me quite as I have liked you. All along you've thought me too 'umble now, I shouldn't wonder. . . . But how little you think of the rightful 'umbleness of a person in my station, Master Copperfield! Father and me was both brought up at a foundation school for boys; and mother, she was likewise brought up at a public sort of charitable establishment. They taught us all a deal of 'umbleness—not much else that I know of—from morning to night. We was to be 'umble to this person, and 'umble to that; and to pull off our caps here, and to make bows there; and always to know our place, and abase ourselves before our betters. And we had such a lot of betters! Father got the monitor-medal by being 'umble. So did I. Father got made a sexton by being 'umble. He had the character, among the gentlefolks, of being such a well-behaved man, that they were determined to bring him in. "Be 'umble, Uriah," says father to me, "and you'll get on. It was what was always being dinned into you and me at school; it's what goes down best. Be 'umble," says father, "and you'll do!" And really it ain't done so bad! . . . When I was quite a young boy,' said Uriah, 'I got to know what 'umbleness did, and I took to it. I ate 'umble pie with an appetite. I stopped at the 'umble part of my learning, and says I, "Hold hard!" When you offered to teach me Latin, I knew better. "People like to be above you," says father; "keep yourself down." I am very 'umble at the present moment . . . but I've got a little power.'"

But even here, it will be seen, Dickens knew just how to apportion the blame and whose head it should rest on most heavily.

And once more, in his humorous riddling of the mean subterfuge of Mr. Spenlow—fit prototype of a whole tribe of business men who wear a mask of goodwill to the world over the face of their selfishness and greed: the subterfuge by which he shelters behind the mythical figure of a Jorkins in order to escape the contempt of those he wrongs so smilingly; and having preached prudence and thrift all his life, dies at last dishonoured, with the duty that it was his business to advocate and by which he thrived, unfulfilled in his own case.

In conclusion may be quoted a piece of commentary appropriate to all the minor characters, which Forster applies particularly to the Peggotty group:—

"It has been their fate, as with all the leading figures of his invention, to pass their names into the language and become types; and he has nowhere given happier embodiment to that purity of homely goodness which, by the kindly and all-reconciling influences of humour, may exalt into comeliness and even grandeur the clumsiest forms of humanity. What has been indicated in the style of the book as its greatest charm is here felt most strongly. The ludicrous so helps the pathos, and the humour so uplifts and refines the sentiment, that mere rude affection and simple manliness . . . passed through the fires of unmerited suffering and heroic endurance, take forms half-chivalrous, half-sublime. It is one of the cants of critical superiority to make supercilious mention of the serious passages in this great writer; but the storm and shipwreck at the close of *Copperfield*, when the body of the seducer is flung dead upon the shore amid the ruins of the home he has wasted and by the side of the man whose heart he has broken, the one as unconscious of what he had failed to reach as the other of what he had perished to save, is a description that may compare with the most impressive in the language."

CHAPTER IX

"BLEAK HOUSE"

I

DICKENS has stated that in *Bleak House* he purposely dwelt on the romantic side of familiar things.

"But," says Forster, "it is the romance of discontent and misery, with a very restless, dissatisfied moral [whatever that may be!], and is too much brought about by agencies disagreeable and sordid. The Guppys, Weevles, Snagsbys, Chadbands, Krooks, and Smallweeds, even the Kenges, Vholes, and Tulkinghorns, are much too real to be pleasant; and the necessity becomes urgent for the reliefs and contrasts of a finer humanity. These last are not wanting; yet it must be said that we hardly escape, even with them, into the old freedom and freshness of the author's imaginative worlds, and that the too conscious unconsciousness of Esther flings something of a shade on the radiant goodness of John Jarndyce himself. Nevertheless, there are very fine delineations in the story. The crazy little Chancery lunatic, Miss Flite; the loud-voiced, tender-souled Chancery victim, Gridley; the poor, good-hearted youth, Richard, broken up in life and character by the suspense of the Chancery suit, on whose success he is to 'begin the world,' believing himself to be saving money when he is stopped from squandering it, and thinking that having saved it he is entitled to fling it away; trooper George, with the Bagnets and their

household, where the most ludicrous points are more forcible for the pathetic touches underlying them; the Jellyby interior, and its philanthropic strong-minded mistress, placid and smiling amid a household muddle out-muddling Chancery itself; the model of deportment, Turveydrop the elder, whose relations to the young people, whom he so superbly patronizes by being dependent on them for everything, touch delightfully some subtle points of truth; the inscrutable Tulkinghorn and the immortal Bucket; all these, and especially the last, have been added by this book to the list of people more intimately and permanently known to us than the scores of actual familiar acquaintance whom we see around us living and dying."

And all this is true enough and sufficiently well stated, in its pedestrian way. But the particular things treated of in this book, that were so familiar to Charles Dickens, were infinitely less so to the vast majority of his readers: a circumstance that Dickens took a rather mean advantage of in foisting the following letter on a confiding public as a likely emanation from the office of a reputable firm of solicitors:—

"Old Square, Lincoln's Inn.

"Madam,

"Jarndyce and Jarndyce.

"Our clt Mr. Jarndyce being abt to rece into his house, under an Order of the Ct of Chy, a Ward of the Ct in this cause, for whom he wishes to secure an elgble compn, directs us to inform [Why not "infm"?] you that he will be glad of your serces in the afsd capacity. "We have arrngd for your being forded, carriage free, pr eight o'clock coach from Reading, on Monday morning next, to White Horse Cellar, Piccadilly, London, where one of our clks will be in waiting to convey you to our offe as above. We are, Madam, Your obedt Servts, Kenge and Carboy."

Dickens could not have let such a letter appear in that preposterous form had he not realized that the general reader is totally unfamiliar with the routine of solicitors' offices, since he must have been aware that any clerk permitting such a letter as that to go forth to a correspondent would have been promptly dismissed by his employer: such abbreviations as these being employed only in rough drafts and miscellaneous memoranda for private use in the office itself. And it is especially odd that Dickens should have fallen to this temptation to air his intimate inner knowledge of legal contractions (as they are called), because as a rule he is altogether superior to such vain displays of curious and unusual erudition. This letter, indeed, is the one outstanding technical flaw in a novel that explored and exploited, as no other novel in our tongue has ever done, an extraordinarily close and accurate acquaintance with every phase and department and aspect of the practice of the law.

"The heart of the story is a Chancery suit. On this the plot hinges; and on incidents connected with it, trivial or important, the passion and suffering turn exclusively. Chance words, or the deeds of chance people, to appearance irrelevant, are found everywhere influencing the course taken by a train of incidents of which the issue is life or death, happiness or misery, to men and women perfectly unknown to them, and to whom they are unknown. Attorneys of all possible grades, law clerks of every conceivable kind, the copyist, the law-stationer, the usurer, all sorts of money-lenders, suitors of every description, haunters of the Chancery Court and their victims, are for ever moving round about the lives of the chief persons in the tale, and drawing them on insensibly, but very certainly, to the issues that await them. . . . The characters multiply as the tale advances, but in each the drift is the same. 'There's no great odds betwixt

my noble and learned brother and myself,' says the grotesque proprietor of the rag-and-bottle shop under the wall of Lincoln's Inn. 'They call me Lord Chancellor and my shop Chancery, and we both of us grub on in a muddle.' . . . Out of the lumber of the shop emerge slowly some fragments of evidence by which the chief actors in the story are sensibly affected, and to which Chancery itself might have succumbed if its devouring capacities had been less complete. But by the time there is found among the lumber the will which puts all to rights in the Jarndyce suit, it is found to be too late to put anything to rights. The costs have swallowed up the estate, and there is an end of the matter."

A keen satire on those costly processes of law which would seem to have been devised expressly for the defeat of justice! Nor is the satire out of date; for herein is contained a deeper, wider lesson than the obvious one drawn from the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce; a lesson as applicable now to the abuses that cumber and obstruct true equity as ever it was.

And Forster is justified in claiming that *Bleak House* is, in the matter of construction, at least, the best thing that Dickens had yet done. Yet its success in that direction seems to have been too heavily paid for in others. A suspicion, to which the absurd letter quoted above lends some countenance, is rampant in the mind of the present writer that Dickens was possibly a little over-eager, in this book, to display his vast and comprehensive knowledge of all that appertains, however loosely, to that stuffy, poky, foul phase of London life upon which his main theme wholly depends for support and motive. The Law has little sense of humour —or of proportion, which is much the same thing. It is egregiously self-satisfied, self-opinionated, pompous, priggish, pragmatical, stiff, and stupid. Its ministers are —in their professional capacity, anyway—men of little honour, less faith, and no bowels. Only Dickens's genius

could have hoped to lift it, by the breath of a single ray of light, out of the noisome slough in which it delights to wallow; and even he was by no means entirely successful in the task he set himself. For *Bleak House*, if it be not actually dull, shines with only a murky, fitful radiance. Its humour is more than a trifle bitter and hard; we laugh at it rather discordantly, as if some of the fog that surrounds legal procedure had got into our throats.

II

Apart from its technical excellences, *Bleak House* marks a sharp decline in Dickens's power, if not exactly in his art. And yet, in many ways, it is one of the most wonderful, as perhaps it is the most clever (and the word is used advisedly) of all his books. Considering its bulk and the multiplicity of its characters, it is extraordinarily well balanced. One feels, in reading it, that no single part, no group, no set of principals or auxiliaries, is given undue prominence over another. And this cannot be truthfully said of most of Dickens's novels, wherein we see the partiality of the author for one favoured little coterie of people, or one highly relished combination of events, gradually usurping a larger and larger share of his attention than the demands of the story warrant.

Esther's Narrative undoubtedly forms the weakest link in the chain of interest. It is often tediously discursive and never quite so convincing as the other portions of the book are—to an outstanding degree. Beside the strongly marked and highly flavoured chapters in which the whole cosmography of the law is minutely presented to us, the chapters purporting to be written by Esther Summerson seem flat and insipid, except where they are obviously out of the mental focus of such a mind as the author would have us assume hers to be. Nevertheless, and to be done with this

devil of a carping propensity, even Esther's Narrative serves its purpose better than at first appears, in that it supplies a still, small strain of tenderness to the harsh Wagnerian music of the main theme. It provides us with green arbours of retreat in which we may sit and drowse awhile, and forget in the contemplation of a rustic simplicity of life our weariness of a peculiarly sordid and distasteful side of existence, with its passions that are never noble but always ignoble, its aims that are never spacious but always narrow and pettifogging, its humours that savour of brine rather than salt, and its rigours that sting and flay instead of kindling the warm blood to a glow of healthy well-being. For this we may be grateful, then, without rejoicing, as we are grateful for the poorest shelter from inclement weather.

Contrast, for instance, Esther's naively ironical pronouncements with the antic philosophy of the demented Miss Flite :—

" ' My dear,' said she, '. . . my brave Physician ought to have a Title bestowed upon him. And no doubt he will. You are of that opinion ? '

" That he well deserved one, yes. That he would ever have one, no.

" ' Why not, Fitz-Jarndyce ? ' she asked, rather sharply.

" I said it was not the custom in England to confer titles on men distinguished by peaceful services, however good and great ; unless occasionally, when they consisted of the accumulation of some very large amount of money.

" ' Why, good gracious,' said Miss Flite, ' how can you say that ? Surely you know, my dear, that all the greatest ornaments of England in knowledge, imagination, active humanity, and improvement of every sort, are added to its nobility ! Look round you, my dear, and consider. *You* must be rambling a little now, I

think, if you don't know that this is the great reason why titles will always last in the land!'

"I am afraid she believed what she said; for there were moments when she was very mad indeed."

Or contrast, more profitably still perhaps, the change of mind that had taken place in Dickens in regard to his view of pursy philanthropy and meddlesome charity, as it was in the days when he wrote *Nicholas Nickleby* and belauded the Brothers Cheeryble, and as it is shown to be in his very different attitude toward such fatuous busybodies as the Borrioboola-Gha tribe and Mrs. Pardiggle.

"Mrs. Pardiggle, leading the way with a great show of moral determination, and talking with much volubility about the untidy habits of the people (though I doubted if the best of us could have been tidy in such a place), conducted us into a cottage in the farthest corner, the ground-flour of which we nearly filled. . . .

"'Well, my friends,' said Mrs. Pardiggle; but her voice had not a friendly sound. '. . . How do you do, all of you? I am here again. I told you you couldn't tire me, you know. I am fond of hard work, and am true to my word.'

"'There an't,' growled the man on the floor '. . . any more on you to come in, is there?'

"'No, my friend,' said Mrs. Pardiggle, '. . . we are all here.'

"'Because I thought there warn't enough of you, perhaps?' said the man. . . .

"'You can't tire me, good people,' said Mrs. Pardiggle, '. . . I enjoy hard work, and the harder you make mine, the better I like it.'

"'Then make it easy for her!' growled the man. '. . . I wants it done and over. I wants a end of these liberties took with my place. I wants a end of being draw'd like a badger. Now you're agoing to poll-pry and question according to custom—I know what

you're agoing to be up to. Well! You haven't got no occasion to be up to it. I'll save you the trouble. Is my daughter a-washin'? Yes, she is a-washin'. Look at the water. Smell it! That's wot we drinks. How do you like it, and what do you think of gin instead? An't my place dirty? Yes, it is dirty—it's nat'rally dirty and nat'rally onwholesome; and we've had five dirty and onwholesome children, as is all dead infants, and so much the better for them, and for us besides. Have I read the little book wot you left? No, I an't read the little book wot you left. There an't nobody here as knows how to read it; and if there was, it wouldn't be suitable to me. It's a book fit for a babby, and I'm not a babby. If you was to leave me a doll, I shouldn't nuss it. How have I been conducting of myself? Why, I've been drunk for three days; and I'd a been drunk four, if I'd a had the money. Don't I never mean for to go to church? No, I don't never mean for to go to church. I shouldn't be expected there, if I did; the beadle's too gen-teel for me. And how did my wife get that black eye? Why, I give it her; and if she says I didn't, she's a Lie!' "

And then contrast, as a change of venue for the same antagonism, this description of "Tom-all-Alone's" with the numerous impressions, scattered throughout the book in too great profusion to be given here, the aristocratic atmosphere of fashion and wealth and rank, of gilded pomp and illicit pride, of peace and plenty and repose, that pervades the country residence of Sir Leicester Dedlock, Chesney Wold.

"Darkness rests upon Tom-all-Alone's. Dilating and dilating since the sun went down last night, it has gradually swelled until it fills every void in the place. For a time there were some dungeon lights burning, as the lamp of Life burns in Tom-all-Alone's, heavily, heavily, in the nauseous air, and winking—as that lamp

winks too, in Tom-all-Alone's—at many horrible things. But they are blotted out. The moon has eyed Tom with a dull cold stare, as admitting some puny emulation of herself in his desert region unfit for life and blasted by volcanic fires; but she has passed on, and is gone. The blackest nightmare in the infernal stables grazes on Tom-all-Alone's, and Tom is fast asleep.

"Much mighty speech-making there has been, both in and out of Parliament, concerning Tom, and much wrathful disputation how Tom shall be got right. Whether he shall be put into the main road by constables, or by beadles, or by bell-ringing, or by force of figures, or by correct principles of taste, or by high church, or by low church, or by no church; whether he shall be set to splitting trusses of polemical straws with the crooked knife of his mind, or whether he shall be put to stone-breaking instead. In the midst of which dust and noise, there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will, be reclaimed according to somebody's theory but nobody's practice. And in the hopeful meantime, Tom goes to perdition head foremost in his old determined spirit.

"But he has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say Nay to the infamous alliance. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, nor a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest

of the proud, and to the highest of the high. Verily, what with tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge."

Out of this cesspool of iniquity and shame creeps one molecule of the spawn that it breeds so fast and so destructively, in the person of Poor Jo.

"O! Here's the boy, gentlemen! Here he is, very muddy, very hoarse, very ragged. Now, boy!—But stop a minute! Caution! This boy must be put through a few preliminary paces. Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heerd of sich a think. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name. Thinks it long enough for *him*. *He* don't find no fault with it. Spell it? No. *He* can't spell it. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What's home? Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom, or about the lie, but knows both. Can't exactly say what'll be done to him arter he's dead, but believes it'll be something wery bad to punish him, and serve him right. And so he'll tell the truth. 'This won't do, gentlemen,' says the coroner, with a melancholy shake of the head '. . . *can't exactly say* won't do, you know. . . . It's terrible depravity. Put the boy aside. . . .'"

"That graceless creature only knows that the dead man (whom he recognized just now by his yellow face and black hair) was sometimes hooted and pursued about the streets. That one cold winter night when he, the boy, was shivering in a doorway near his crossing, the man turned to look at him, and came back, and having questioned him and found that he had not a friend in the world, said, 'Neither have I. Not one!' and gave him the price of a supper and a night's lodging. That the man had often spoken to him since; and asked him whether he slept sound at night, and how he bore cold and hunger, and whether he ever wished

to die, and similar strange questions. That when the man had no money, he would say in passing, 'I am as poor as you to-day, Jo'; but that when he had any, he had always (as the boy most heartily believes) been glad to give him some.

"'He was wery good to me,' says the boy, wiping his eyes with his wretched sleeve. 'Wen I see him a-layin' so stritched out just now, I wished he could have heerd me tell him so. He was wery good to me, he was! . . .' Into a beastly strip of ground which a Turk would reject as a savage abomination, and a Caffre would shudder at, they bring our dear brother here departed, to receive Christian burial. With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate—with every villainy of life in action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close on life—here, they lower our dear brother down a foot or two: here, sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many a sick bedside: a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilization and barbarism walked this boastful island together.

"Come night, come darkness, for you cannot come too soon, or stay too long, by such a place as this! Come, straggling lights into the windows of the ugly houses; and you who do iniquity therein, do it at least with this dread scene shut out. Come, flame of gas, burning so sullenly above the iron gate on which the poisoned air deposits its witch-ointment slimy to the touch! It is well that you should call to every passer-by: 'Look here!'

"With the night comes a slouching figure through the tunnel court, to the outside of the iron gate. It holds the gates with its hands and looks in between the bars; stands looking in, for a little while.

"It then, with an old broom it carries, softly sweeps the step, and makes the archway clean. It does so,

very busily and trimly; looks in again, a little while; and so departs.

"Jo, is it thou? Well, well! Though a rejected witness, who 'can't exactly say' what will be done to him in greater hands than men's, thou art not quite in outer darkness. There is something like a distant ray of light in thy muttered reason for this:

"'He was wery good to me, he was!'

Jo makes this end. And the passage may be set down, without remark, as a fitting apologue to complete this chapter:—

"'Jo, did you ever know a prayer?'

"'Never knowed nothink, sir.'

"'Not so much as one short prayer?'

"'No, sir. Nothink at all. Mr. Chadband he was a-prayin' wunst at Mr. Sangsby's and I heerd him, but he sounded as if he was a-speakin' to hisself and not to me. He prayed a lot, but *I* couldn't make out nothink on it. Different times, there was other gentlemen come down Tom-all-Alone's a-prayin', but they all mostly said as the t'other ones prayed wrong, and all mostly sounded to be a-talking to theirselves, or a-passing blame on the t'others, and not a-talking to us. *We* never knowed nothink. *I* never knowed what it was all about.'

"It takes him a long time to say this. . . . After a short relapse into sleep or stupor, he makes, of a sudden, a strong effort to get out of bed.

"'Stay, Jo! What now?'

"'It's time for me to go down to that there berryin' ground, sir,' he returns, with a wild look.

"'Lie down and tell me. What burying-ground, Jo?'

"'Where they laid him as was wery good to me, wery good to me indeed, he was. It's time fur me to go down to that there berryin' ground, sir, and ask to be put along with him. I wants to go there and be berried.

He used fur to say to me, "I am as poor as you to-day, Jo," he ses. I wants to tell him that I am as poor as him now, and have come there to be laid along with him.'

"'By-and-by, Jo. By-and-by.'

"'Ah! P'r'aps they wouldn't do it if I was to go myself. But will you promise to have me took there, sir, and laid along with him?'

"'I will, indeed.'

"'Thank'ee, sir. Thank'ee, sir. They'll have to get the key of the gate afore they can take me in, for it's allus locked. And there's a step there, as I used for to clean with my broom.—It's turned wery dark, sir. Is there any light a-comin'?'

"'It is coming fast, Jo.' Fast. . . .

"The light is come upon the dark, benighted way. Dead!

"Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day."

CHAPTER X

"HARD TIMES"

I

RUSKIN promoted *Hard Times* to the very highest rank among Dickens's books.

"The essential value and truth of Dickens's writings" (he says) "have been unwisely lost sight of by many thoughtful persons, merely because he presents his truth with some colour of caricature. Unwisely, because Dickens's caricature, though often gross, is never mistaken. Allowing for his manner of telling them, the things he tells us are always true. I wish that he could think it right to limit his brilliant exaggeration to works written only for public amusement; and when he takes up a subject of high national importance, such as that which he handled in *Hard Times*, that he would use severer and more accurate analysis. The usefulness of that work (to my mind, in several respects, the greatest he has written) is with many persons seriously diminished, because Mr. Bounderby is a dramatic monster instead of a characteristic example of a worldly master; and Stephen Blackpool a dramatic perfection, instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman. But let us not lose the use of Dickens's wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire. He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially *Hard Times*, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in

social questions. They will find much that is partial, and, because partial, apparently unjust; but if they examine all the evidence on the other side, which Dickens seems to overlook, it will appear, after all their trouble, that his view was the finally right one, grossly and sharply told."

Let us examine this criticism rather closely, for a moment. What Ruskin says about Mr. Bounderby does infinitely more credit to his faith in human nature than to his knowledge of it. Mr. Bounderby is quite a common type, whose like will be known to many readers. But Ruskin was hardly a man of the world (to employ an abominable phrase which nevertheless has its use and place occasionally), and it implies no disparagement of him to say that his judgments on countless matters concerning both humanity and art were narrow in the extreme, and intensely coloured by the sheltered, secluded life he led and the restricted habits of mind that mode of life engendered. The faults that he imputes to Dickens, of a tendency to exaggeration and partiality, were largely his own faults, with this added: that Dickens had a subjective knowledge of physical hardship and suffering and moral degradation, and an intimate sympathy with the poor, born of his own one-time lowly estate, which Ruskin could only glimpse dimly and incorrectly from the outside and estimate at a distance. That Dickens had his crude limitations as well as Ruskin is not denied. Ruskin is right when he describes Stephen Blackpool as being "a dramatic perfection, instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman." And the reason of this is obvious enough. Dickens did not know the working-man. He had never mixed as an equal in the society of working-men. The hard toil of his childhood consisted in a menial drudgery to which the skilled artisan holds himself altogether superior. And afterwards, when Dickens became a lawyer's clerk, he

joined perforce the class which is virulently antagonistic to, and snobbishly intolerant of, the working-man. None of Dickens's relatives were of the working-class, either. His father might be described, perhaps, as a professional man without a profession. Dickens himself married into the family of an artist, and the years of his fame were mainly spent amid artistic and literary and theatrical circles, with incidental spasmodic excursions into aristocratic society and that of men of affairs: politicians, publicists, philanthropists, and so on. It may be conceded, then, that Dickens never crystallized in his own mind any right conception of the British Working Man as he really lives and feels and thinks, in contradistinction to the grotesque monstrosity that lampoonists and party-jobbers make him out to be. Dickens saw the working-man as a rude, bluff, noisy, hearty fellow: unintelligently honest and diligent, stupidly obedient and subservient, as a rule, to his pastors and masters and those set in authority over him, good-hearted and good-humoured enough, patient and dogged and conscientious, stupid and radically dull, inherently unambitious and docile, but subject to rare outbursts of a rebellious spirit manifested in a futile, muddle-headed way. Which is to say that Dickens was essentially of the middle-classes.

Proof of his ignorance of the true working-man is forthcoming in the fact that, when he had chosen the subject of *Hard Times* and was wishful to verify his data, he went to Preston, where a strike was in progress, and could write of what he saw there in this queer strain:—

"I am afraid I shall not be able to get much here. Except the crowds at the street corners reading the placards pro and con; and the cold absence of smoke from the mill-chimneys; there is very little in the streets to make the town remarkable. I am told that the people 'sit at home and mope.' The delegates with

the money from the neighbouring places come in to-day to report the amounts they bring; and to-morrow they are paid. When I have seen both these ceremonies I shall return. It is a nasty place (I thought it was a model town); and I am in the Bull Hotel, before which some time ago the people assembled supposing the masters to be here, and on demanding to have them out were remonstrated with by the landlady in person."

In the light of our modern better understanding of these matters we are constrained to ask: What went he forth to see? Riotings? Demonstrations in force? Incendiarism? Battle and murder and pillage in the streets? Lamp-post executions? Raids on private property? Wreckage and looting of homes and shops, public-houses and stores? It is fairly plain that he did anticipate some such dramatic scenes and happenings as these; and, as a literary artist, at least, was disappointed by their absence.

Hard Times is at once the shortest and the most closely welded of all Dickens's novels. And it is remarkable, too, in other far more momentous ways. It is remarkable, first of all, as being singularly devoid of that humanizing element of Dickens's art which so inimitably blended humour and pathos together, and on which Dickens usually relied for his best and strongest effects. There is humour in the book, of course, but it is hardly ever sympathetic or kindly or (to use another hardly-used term) genial. And such pathos as it contains is rather a pathos of condition and circumstance and character than the episodic, emotional kind that Dickens has used us to. There is a dry hardness of fibre and a consuming bitterness of tone throughout the book, also. The treatment of the various characters is objective to an extent that would probably have misled many of his habitual readers into mistaking the identity of the author, had it been published anony-

mously, and had the nomenclature been different, for that inevitably betrays Dickens's hand. The handling of the scenes between James Harthouse and Tom Gradgrind, the Whelp, is firm and decisive and grimly severe almost to the verge of brutality. It is doubtful if Dickens ever quite touched the same height of achievement, in a field that he had never previously explored, as he reaches in these passages; they have a quality of tempered scorn and austere cynicism which, ordinarily, one would say was wholly foreign to Dickens's own temperament, and in the adoption of which, to the accomplishment of a particular, definite end, he reveals a new, amazing versatility of talent that to me, personally, is of a kind such as I had never imagined he possessed until I came to read *Hard Times* for the first time, which did not happen until I had already read every one of his other novels, over and over again.

For *Hard Times* is the least alluring of his novels. It does not capture the fancy or tickle the palate, or evoke the more facile sensations so readily as his other novels do. It is the least endued with charm. It repelled me as a youth, so that I only came to read it with any enjoyment or understanding in my more leisured manhood, when I did not so ardently crave for diversion or mere distraction from the weary rigours of my daily lot. But now it is my second favourite among his books. It contents me in a way that only one other transcends. Stephen Blackpool is, as Ruskin declared in his wonted dogmatic fashion, more or less a failure. And in the presentment of the contrasting minor figure, Slackbridge, one traces the influence of a stupid and ignorant prejudice against a type of agitator who, however base his ultimate motives and however detestable his self-seeking, must originally have been imbued with some entirely worthy impulses to have started at all along a line of activity where the work and the danger, the anxiety and the odium, are so great, and the emoluments and the glory

are so small. The manner of the depiction of both Slackbridge and Blackpool in this book is equally to be deplored in either case as tending to travesty two outstanding goodly types of the proletarian.

But notwithstanding these defects of workmanship, which necessarily detract considerably from the cogency and force of its moral, *Hard Times* does contain some invaluable expositions of some most important truths, and so is one of the most admirable of Dickens's books, especially in that connection with which these chapters particularly deal. It called attention to some fundamental facts of human nature that such schools of thought as the late lamented Manchestrian are in the way of ignoring absolutely. As, for example, that you cannot train anyone properly unless you cultivate the fancy, and allow fair scope to the primitive affections and passions. That you cannot govern men on any principle of averages; and that to buy in the cheapest and sell in the dearest market is not the chief aim in life. That you cannot treat the working-man fairly unless, in dealing with his wrongs and his delusions, you take equally into account the simplicity and tenacity of his nature, arising partly from limited knowledge, but more from honesty and singleness of intention. Fiction cannot prove a case, but it can express forcibly a righteous sentiment; and this is here done unsparingly upon matters of universal concern. The book is appropriately inscribed to Carlyle.

II

But as the second section of this present enterprise approaches its conclusion, and the scheme of my labours enlarges its borders, comment seems to become more and more superfluous—as it becomes inevitably more and more merely reiterative—and it is found that my ulterior purpose is better and better served by means of

carefully co-ordinated and correlated extracts from the novels themselves. Thus it will be sufficient, first to state the point of view that is consistently attacked in *Hard Times*, as it is set forth in the first paragraph of the first chapter; and then to develop its lesson by means of other passages in which the author speaks for himself, or through the mouths of his puppets.

" 'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!' "

Thus speaks Mr. Gradgrind.

" Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir, —peremptorily Thomas—Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic. You might hope to get some other nonsensical belief into the head of George Gradgrind, or Augustus Gradgrind, or John Gradgrind, or Joseph Gradgrind (all supposititious, non-existent persons), but into the head of Thomas Gradgrind—no, sir!"

And this apostle also of the same dreary creed :—

" A mighty man at cutting and drying, he was; a government officer; in his way (and in most other people's too) a professed pugilist; always in training, always with a system to force down the general

throat like a bolus, always to be heard of at the bar of his little Public Office, ready to fight all England. To continue in fistic phraseology, he had a genius for coming up to the scratch, wherever and whatever it was, and proving himself an ugly customer. He would go in and damage any subject whatever with his right, follow up with his left, stop, exchange, counter, bore his opponent (he always fought All England) to the ropes, and fall upon him neatly. He was certain to knock the wind out of common sense, and render that unlucky adversary deaf to the call of time. And he had it in charge from high authority to bring about the great public-office Millennium, when Commissioners should reign upon earth. . . . 'You are to be in all things regulated and governed' (says this gentleman, addressing children) 'by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use,' said the gentleman, 'for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste.' "

But how does this jaundiced philosophy affect those who are destined to become its natural heirs?

"There were five young Gradgrinds, and they were

models every one. They had been lectured at from their tenderest years ; coursed, like little hares. Almost as soon as they could run alone, they had been made to run to the lecture-room. The first object with which they had an association, or of which they had a remembrance, was a large black board with a dry Ogre chalking ghastly white figures on it.

" Not that they knew, by name or nature, anything about an Ogre. Fact forbid ! I only use the word to express a monster in a lecturing castle, with Heaven knows how many heads manipulated into one, taking childhood captive, and dragging it into gloomy statistical dens by the hair.

" No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon ; it was up in the moon before it could speak distinctly. No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star ; how I wonder what you are ! No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on the subject, each little Gradgrind having at five years old dissected the Great Bear like a Professor Owen, and driven Charles's Wain like a locomotive engine-driver. No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in a field with that famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the dog who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the malt, or with that yet more famous cow who swallowed Tom Thumb : it had never heard of those celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as a graminivorous ruminating quadruped with several stomachs."

And how do these children appreciate their bitter heritage of Matters-of-fact when they have tasted of its fruits ?

" ' Father, I want to speak to you. . . . Father, you have trained me from my cradle ? '

" ' Yes, Louisa.'

" ' I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny.'

"He looked at her, in doubt and dread, vacantly repeating: 'Curse the hour? Curse the hour?'

"'How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here?' She struck herself with both her hands upon her bosom. 'If it had ever been here, its ashes alone would save me from the void in which my whole life sinks. I did not mean to say this; but, father, you remember the last time we conversed in this room? . . .'

"'Yes, Louisa.'

"'What has risen to my lips now would have risen to my lips then, if you had given me a moment's help. I don't reproach you, father. What you have never nurtured in me, you have never nurtured in yourself; but O! if you had only done so long ago, or if you had only neglected me, what a much better and much happier creature I should have been this day! . . . Father, if you had known, when we were last together here, what even I feared while I strove against it—as it has been my task from infancy to strive against every natural prompting that has arisen in my heart; if you had known that there lingered in my breast, sensibilities, affections, weaknesses, capable of being cherished into strength, defying all the calculations ever made by man, and no more known to his arithmetic than his Creator is—would you have given me to the husband whom I am now sure that I hate?'

"He said, 'No, no, my poor child!'

"'Would you have doomed me, at any time, to the frost and blight that have hardened and spoiled me? Would you have robbed me—for no one's enrichment—only for the greater desolation of this world—of the immaterial part of my life, the spring and summer of my

belief, my refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me, my school in which I should have learned to be more humble and more trusting with them, and to hope in my little sphere to make them better ?'

"'O no, no. No, Louisa.'

"'Yet, father, if I had been stone blind; if I had groped my way by my sense of touch, and had been free, while I knew the shapes and surfaces of things, to exercise my fancy somewhat, in regard to them; I should have been a million times wiser, happier, more loving, more contented, more innocent and human in all good respects, than I am with the eyes that I have. . . . With a hunger and thirst upon me, father, which have never been for a moment appeased; with an ardent impulse towards some region where rules and figures and definitions were not quite absolute; I have grown up, battling every inch of my way.'

"'I never knew you were unhappy, my child.'

"'Father, I always knew it. In this strife I have almost repulsed and crushed my better angel into a demon. What I have learned has left me doubting, misbelieving, despising, regretting, what I have not learned; and my dismal resource has been to think that life would soon go by, and that nothing in it could be worth the pain and trouble of a contest.'

"'And you so young, Louisa!' he said with pity.

"'And I so young. . . .'"

Thus speaks the daughter, given in marriage to a man more than twice her age. And the son ?

"It is very remarkable that a young gentleman who had been brought up under one continuous system of unnatural restraint should be a hypocrite; but it was certainly the case with Tom. It was very strange that a young gentleman who had never been left to his own guidance for five consecutive minutes should be incapable at last of governing himself; but so it was with

Tom. It was altogether unaccountable that a young gentleman whose imagination had been strangled in his cradle should be still inconvenienced by its ghost in the form of grovelling sensualities; but such a monster, beyond all doubt, was Tom."

The wretched whelp betrays his sister to her would-be betrayer. When, unconsciously, he wreaks revenge upon his father by his weakness and his viciousness, by the shameful deed to which his dissipation impels him, and its culmination in disgrace and exile,

"'How was this done?' asked the father.

"'How was what done?' moodily answered the son.

"'This robbery,' answered the father. . . .

"'I forced the safe myself overnight, and shut it up ajar before I went away. I had had the key that was found made long before. I dropped it that morning that it might be supposed to have been used. I didn't take the money all at once. I pretended to put my balance away every night, but I didn't. Now you know all about it.'

"'If a thunderbolt had fallen on me,' said the father, 'it would have shocked me less than this.'

"'I don't see why,' grumbled the son. 'So many people are employed in situations of trust; so many people, out of so many, will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times, of its being a law. How can *I* help laws? You have comforted others with such things, father. Comfort yourself.'"

Turn we now to Mr. Bounderby:—

"Who *was* Mr. Bounderby? . . . He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer and what not. A big loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open, and lift his eyebrows up.

A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start. A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility. . . .

" ' I hadn't a shoe to my foot ' (says he, speaking of his childhood). ' As to a stocking, I didn't know such a thing by name. I passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pig-sty. That's the way I spent my tenth birthday. Not that a ditch was new to me, for I was born in a ditch.' "

Mrs. Gradgrind . . . hoped it was a dry ditch.

" ' No ! As wet as a sop. A foot of water in it,' said Mr. Bounderby.

" ' Enough to give a baby cold,' Mrs. Gradgrind considered.

" ' Cold ? I was born with inflammation of the lungs, and of everything else, I believe, that was capable of inflammation,' returned Mr. Bounderby. ' For years, ma'am, I was one of the most miserable little wretches ever seen. I was so sickly that I was always moaning and groaning. I was so ragged and dirty that you wouldn't have touched me with a pair of tongs. . . . How I fought through it *I* don't know. . . . I was determined, I suppose. I have been a determined character in later life, and I suppose I was then. Here I am, Mrs. Gradgrind, anyhow, and nobody to thank for my being here but myself. . . . *My* mother ? Bolted, ma'am,' said Bounderby. . . . ' My mother left me to my grandmother . . . and according to the best of my remembrance my grandmother was the wickedest and worst old woman that ever lived. If I got a little pair of shoes by any chance, she would take 'em off and sell 'em for drink. . . . I was to pull through it I suppose, Mrs. Gradgrind. Whether I was

to do it or not, ma'am, I did it. I pulled through it, though nobody threw me out a rope. Vagabond, errand-boy, vagabond, labourer, porter, clerk, chief manager, small partner, Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. Those are the antecedents, and the culmination. Josiah Bounderby of Coketown learnt his letters from the outsides of the shops, Mrs. Gradgrind, and was first able to tell the time upon a dial-plate, from studying the steeple-clock of St. Giles's Church, London, under the direction of a drunken cripple, who was a convicted thief, and an incorrigible vagrant. Tell Josiah Bounderby of Coketown of your district schools and your model-schools, and your training-schools, and your whole kettle-of-fish of schools; and Josiah Bounderby of Coketown tells you plainly, all right, all correct—he hadn't such advantages—but let us have hard-headed, solid-fisted people—the education that made him won't do for everybody, he knows well—such and such his education was, however, and you may force him to swallow boiling fat, but you shall never force him to suppress the facts of his life.' "

And in the upshot, Mrs. Pegler, his old mother whom he has defamed and vilified, and whose early care of him he has rewarded in such unspeakably vile fashion; the humble lovable old woman who watches her son's worldly advancement from afar and effaces herself that she may not sully its brazen glitter by her presence, is brought face to face with her empty windbag of a son, and pleads with him thus, to forgive her unwitting intrusion :—

" 'My dear Josiah! . . . My darling boy! I am not to blame. It's not my fault, Josiah. I told this lady over and over again, that I knew she was doing what would not be agreeable to you, but she would do it.' "

Then he turns on the meddlesome lady who has innocently conspired to bring about his discomfiture;

and again the outraged mother pleads with him for his indulgence :—

"'My own boy! She threatened me that if I resisted her I should be brought by constables, and it was better to come quietly than make a stir in such a——' Mrs. Pegler glanced timidly but proudly round the walls—'such a fine house as this. Indeed, indeed, it is not my fault! My dear, noble, stately boy! I have always lived quiet and secret, Josiah, my dear. I have never broken the condition once. I have never said I was your mother. I have admired you at a distance; and if I have come to town sometimes, with long times between, to take a proud peep at you, I have done it unbeknown, my love, and gone away again. . . .' Mr. Gradgrind addressed that maligned old lady.

"'I am surprised, madam,' he observed with severity, 'that in your old age you have the face to claim Mr. Bounderby for your son, after your unnatural and inhuman treatment of him.'

"'*Me* unnatural!' cried poor old Mrs. Pegler. '*Me* inhuman! To my dear boy?'

"'Dear!' repeated Mr. Gradgrind. 'Yes; dear in his self-made prosperity, madam, I dare say. Not very dear, however, when you deserted him in his infancy, and left him to the brutality of a drunken grandmother.'

"'*I* deserted my Josiah!' cried Mrs. Pegler, clasping her hands. 'Now, Lord forgive you, sir, for your wicked imaginations, and for your scandal against the memory of my poor mother, who died in my arms before Josiah was born. May you repent of it, sir, and live to know better! . . .'

"'Do you deny then, madam, that you left your son to—to be brought up in the gutter?'

"'Josiah in the gutter!' exclaimed Mrs. Pegler. 'No such a thing, sir. Never! For shame on you! My dear boy knows, and will give *you* to know, that

though he come of humble parents, he come of parents that loved him as dear as the best could, and never thought it hardship on themselves to pinch a bit that he might write and cipher beautiful, and I've his books at home to show it. Aye, have I,' said Mrs. Pegler, with indignant pride. 'And my dear boy knows, and will give *you* to know, sir, that after his beloved father died, when he was eight years old, his mother too could pinch a bit, as it was her duty and her pleasure and her pride to do it, to help him out in life, and put him 'prentice. And a steady lad he was, and a kind master he had to lend him a hand, and well he worked his own way forward to be rich and thriving. And *I'll* give you to know, sir—for this my dear boy won't—that though his mother kept but a little village shop, he never forgot her, but pensioned me on thirty pound a year—more than I want, for I put by out of it—only making the condition that I was to keep down in my own part, and make no boasts about him, and not trouble him. And I never have, except with looking at him once a year, when he has never knowed it. And it's right,' said poor old Mrs. Pegler, in affectionate championship, 'that I *should* keep down in my own part, and I have no doubts that if I was here I should do a many unfitting things, and I am well contented, and I can keep my pride in my Josiah to myself, and I can love for love's own sake! And I am ashamed of you, sir,' said Mrs. Pegler lastly, 'for your slanders and suspicions. And for I never stood here before, nor ever wanted to stand here when my dear son said no. And I shouldn't be here now, if it hadn't been for being brought here. And for shame upon you, O for shame, to accuse me of being a bad mother to my son, with my son standing here to tell you so different!' "

Yes. Again let it be said that it is infinitely creditable to Ruskin's simple faith in human nature that he should deem Mr. Bounderby an inhuman monster;

but—alas !—it is not evidence of much knowledge or experience. There are scores of similar windbags bouncing and soaring over our heads to-day, who only require pricking with the sword of Truth to tumble ignominiously to earth, with all their vain pretensions in rags and the very breath of their being clean gone out of them.

CHAPTER XI

"LITTLE DORRIT"

I

IT is credibly related that an historical incident took place, four months after Dickens died, which would greatly have delighted him. It was the meeting of Bismarck and Jules Favre under the walls of Paris. The Prussian was waiting to open fire on the city; the Frenchman was engaged in the arduous task of showing the wisdom of not doing it. And "we learn," say the papers of the day, "that while the two eminent statesmen were trying to find a basis of negotiation, Von Moltke was seated in a corner, reading *Little Dorrit*." Who will doubt that the chapter on How Not To Do It was then absorbing the old soldier's attention?

It is just that invention—which was no invention—of the Circumlocution Office which constitutes the real triumph of *Little Dorrit*. The book would have been well worth writing, if only for that sake. Nothing better has been done in English literature, in the way of bold and just satire, than this immortal exposure of the methods of Red Tape and Place-Making, and of the policy, not merely of Letting Things Be, but of Hindering Things From Being Better, which has always stood in the way of British advancement. "If I might offer any apology," says Dickens in his Preface, "for so exaggerated a fiction as the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office, I would seek it in the common experience of an Englishman, without presuming to mention the

unimportant fact of my having done that violence to good manners, in the days of a Russian war, and of a Court of Enquiry at Chelsea." Well, we have had a South African War and a Pall Mall Enquiry, since then.

"So exaggerated a fiction as the Barnacles"—one thinks of the Hungry Hamiltons and the Hotel Cecil!—"and the Circumlocution Office," says Dickens . . . of course, ironically. For the sole aim and purpose of the Circumlocution Office, which was to obstruct justice and to thwart the claims of equity, not to speak of common honesty and irrefutable right, are sustained to-day with almost unabated vigour by our Government officials, our heads of departments—the overpaid heirs of privilege and usurpation—our legal luminaries, and all the rest of our ordained public administrators, whatever their grade or rank. Even now, as these words are written, a case (in which, curiously enough, Dickens's name has frequently cropped up) is engaging the Courts, in its preliminary stages, which has already wasted years and years of time, and thousands and thousands of pounds—all to no effect—and which a couple of ordinary labourers, armed with a few simple implements, could settle in a quarter of an hour, if plain reason ruled over the counsels of the State instead of crass unreason. And it would be amazing if it were not English, that so little should have been done to improve off the face of the earth the evils which Dickens so searchingly and caustically laid bare, by means of types and nicknames that are among the many utterances of his genius which have since passed into the language. One would imagine that our national sense of humour alone would have availed, long ago, to sweep away these costly absurdities and slow cumbrous survivals of a dead-and-gone, hole-and-corner medievalism, if one could credit the English people with such a sense. One wonders that these anachronisms were not laughed out of existence fifty years ago, instead of enduring

even unto this day, as they do. For what Dickens wrote in 1856 is as true, at the opening of the twentieth century, of our modern anarchic lack of method and system, and our clogging superfluity of machinery and process, in dealing with most matters of public policy as ever it was.

And circling about the Circumlocution Office, in their various eccentric orbits, we are shown a host of ugly giddy satellites, held precariously in their places by that centrifugal force and only very occasionally eclipsing one another, when they are immediately replaced by others as ugly and destructive; such feeble constellations as the Tite Barnacles and the Stiltstalkings, and such solitary planets as the Merdles, the Edmund Sparklers, the Mrs. Generals, ay, and even the good perverse Mr. Meagleses. But let the author speak.

"The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time, without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office. Its finger was in the largest public pie and in the smallest public tart. It was equally impossible to do the plainest right, and to undo the plainest wrong, without the express authority of the Circumlocution Office. . . . This glorious institution had been early in the field, when the one sublime principle involving the difficult art of governing a country, was first distinctly revealed to statesmen. It had been foremost to study that bright revelation, and to carry its shining influence through the whole of the official proceedings. Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving —How Not To Do It. . . .

"It is true that How not to do it was the great study and object of all public departments and professional

politicians all round the Circumlocution Office. It is true that every new premier and every new government, coming in because they had upheld a certain thing as necessary to be done, were no sooner come in than they applied their utmost faculties to discovering How not to do it. It is true that from the moment when a general election was over, every returned man who had been raving on hustings because it hadn't been done, and who had been asking the friends of the honourable gentlemen in the opposite interest on pain of impeachment to tell him why it hadn't been done, and who had been asserting that it must be done, and who had been pledging himself that it should be done, began to devise, How it was not to be done. It is true that the debates of both Houses of Parliament the whole session through, uniformly tended to the protracted deliberation, How not to do it. . . . All this is true, but the Circumlocution Office went beyond it. . . .

"Numbers of people were lost in the Circumlocution Office. Unfortunates with wrongs, or with projects for the general welfare (and they had better have had wrongs at first than have taken that bitter English recipe for certainly getting them) who in slow lapse of time and agony had passed safely through other public departments: who, according to rule, had been bullied in this, over-reached by that, and evaded by the other; got referred at last to the Circumlocution Office, and never reappeared in the light of day. . . .

"Sometimes angry spirits attacked the Circumlocution Office. Sometimes, parliamentary questions were asked about it, and even parliamentary motions made or threatened about it, by demagogues so low and ignorant as to hold that the real recipe of government was, How to do it. Then would the noble lord, or right honourable gentleman, in whose department it was to defend the Circumlocution Office, put an orange in his pocket, and make a regular field-day of the occasion.

Then would he come down to that house with a slap upon the table, and meet the honourable gentleman foot to foot. Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman that the Circumlocution Office not only was blameless in this matter, but was commendable in this matter, was extollable to the skies in this matter. . . . Then would he keep one eye upon a coach or crammer from the Circumlocution Office sitting below the bar, and smash the honourable gentleman with the Circumlocution Office account of this matter. And although one or two things always happened; namely, either that the Circumlocution Office had nothing to say and said it, or that it had something to say of which the noble lord, or right honourable gentleman, blundered one half and forgot the other; the Circumlocution Office was always voted immaculate by an accommodating majority. . . .

"The Barnacle family had for some time helped to administer the Circumlocution Office. The Tite Barnacle branch, indeed, considered themselves in a general way as having vested rights in that direction, and took it ill if any other family had much to say to it. The Barnacles were a very high family, and a very large family. They were dispersed all over the public offices, and held all sorts of public places. Either the nation was under a load of obligation to the Barnacles, or the Barnacles were under a load of obligation to the nation. It was not quite unanimously settled which; the Barnacles having their opinion, the nation theirs. . . .

"Here arises another feature of the Circumlocution Office, not previously mentioned. . . . When that admirable Department got into trouble, and was, by some infuriated member of Parliament, whom the smaller Barnacles almost suspected of labouring under diabolic possession, attacked on the merits of no individual case, but as an Institution wholly abominable and Bedlamite; then the noble or right honourable

Barnacle who represented it in the House, would smite that member and cleave him asunder, with a statement of the quantity of business (for the prevention of business) done by the Circumlocution Office. Then would that noble or right honourable Barnacle hold in his hand a paper containing a few figures, to which, with the permission of the House, he would entreat its attention. Then would the inferior Barnacles exclaim, obeying orders, 'Hear, Hear, Hear!' and 'Read!' Then would the noble or right honourable Barnacle perceive, sir, from this little document, which he thought might carry conviction even to the perversest mind (Derisive laughter and cheering from the Barnacle fry), that within the short compass of the last financial half-year, this much maligned Department (Cheers) had written and received fifteen thousand letters (Loud cheers), had made twenty-four thousand minutes (Louder cheers), and Thirty-two thousand, five hundred and seventeen memoranda (Vehement cheering). Nay, an ingenious gentleman connected with the Department, and himself a valuable public servant, had done him the favour to make a curious calculation of the amount of stationery consumed in it during the same period. . . . He derived from it the remarkable fact that the sheets of foolscap paper it had devoted to the public service would pave the footways on both sides of Oxford Street from end to end, and leave nearly a quarter of a mile to spare for the Park (Immense cheering and laughter); while of tape—red tape—it had used enough to stretch in graceful festoons from Hyde Park Corner to the General Post Office. . . .

"The devoted Arthur Clennam boldly assails this hoary institution with inquiries for information.

"'I want to know,' said Arthur Clennam. . . .

"A Barnacle . . . on the more sprightly side of the family . . . said in an easy way, 'Oh, you had better not bother yourself about it, I think.'

"'Not bother myself about it?'

"'No! I recommend you not to bother yourself about it. . . . You can if you like. I can give you plenty of forms to fill up. Lots of 'em here. You can have a dozen if you like. But you'll never go on with it. . . .'

"'Would it be such hopeless work? Excuse me; I am a stranger in England.'

"'*I* don't say it would be hopeless. . . . I don't express an opinion about that. I only express an opinion about you. *I* don't think you'd go on with it. However, of course, you can do as you like. I suppose there was a failure in the performance of a contract, or something of that kind, was there?'

"'I really don't know.'

"'Well! That you can find out. Then you'll find out what Department the contract was in, and then you'll find out all about it there.'

"'I beg your pardon. How shall I find out?'

"'Why, you'll—you'll ask till they tell you. Then you'll memorialize that Department (according to regular forms which you'll find out) for leave to memorialize this Department. If you get it (which you may after a time) that memorial must be entered in that Department, sent to be registered in this Department, sent back to be signed by that Department, sent back to be countersigned by this Department, and then it will begin to be regularly before that Department. You'll find out when the business passes through each of these stages, by asking at both Departments till they tell you.'

"'But surely this is not the way to do the business,' Arthur Clennam could not help saying.

"This airy young Barnacle was quite entertained by his simplicity in supposing for a moment that it was. This light in hand young Barnacle knew perfectly that it was not. This touch and go young Barnacle

had 'got up' the Department in a private secretaryship, that he might be ready for any little bit of fat that came to hand; and he fully understood the Department to be a politico-diplomatic hocus pocus piece of machinery, for the assistance of the nobs in keeping off the snobs. This dashing young Barnacle, in a word, was likely to become a statesman, and to make a figure.

"'When the business is regularly before that Department, whatever it is,' pursued this bright young Barnacle, 'then you can watch it from time to time through that Department. When it comes regularly before this Department, then you must watch it from time to time through this Department. We shall have to refer it right and left; and when we refer it anywhere, then you will have to look it up. When it comes back to us at any time, then you had better look *us* up. When it sticks anywhere, you'll have to try to give it a jog. When you write to another Department about it, and then to this Department about it, and don't hear anything satisfactory about it, why then you had better—keep on writing.'"

Arthur Clennam does. And passes into a byword among all the Barnacles, of whom we get these illuminative glimpses:—

"The Mr. Tite Barnacle who at the period now in question usually coached or crammed the statesman at the head of the Circumlocution Office . . . was more flush of blood than money. As a Barnacle he had his place, which was a snug thing enough; and as a Barnacle he had of course put his son, Barnacle Junior, in the office. But he had intermarried with a branch of the Stiltstalkings, who were also better endowed in a sanguineous point of view than with real or personal property; and of this marriage there had been issue, Barnacle Junior, and three young ladies. What with the patrician requirements of Barnacle Junior, the three young ladies, Mrs. Tite Barnacle née Stiltstalking, and

himself, Mr. Tite Barnacle found the intervals between quarter-day and quarter-day rather longer than he could have desired; a circumstance which he always attributed to the country's parsimony. . . .

"There was Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle himself, in the odour of Circumlocution—with the very smell of Despatch-Boxes upon him . . . who had risen to official heights on the wings of one indignant idea, and that was, My Lords, that I am yet to be told that it behoves a Minister of this free country to set bounds to the philanthropy, to cramp the charity, to fetter the public spirit, to contract the enterprise, to damp the independent self-reliance of its people. . . ."

Good game for Socialist shot, this pose!

"And there . . . was William Barnacle, who had made the ever-famous coalition with Tudor Stiltstalking, and who always kept ready his own particular recipe for How not to do it; sometimes tapping the Speaker, and drawing it fresh out of him, with a 'First, I will beg you, sir, to inform the House what Precedent we have for the course into which the honourable gentleman would precipitate us' . . . and oftentimes crushing the honourable gentleman flat on the spot, by telling him there was no Precedent. . . .

"And there, too, was another Barnacle, a lively one, who had leaped through twenty places in quick succession, and was always in two or three at once, and who was the much-respected inventor of an art which he practised with great success and admiration in all Barnacle Governments. This was, when he was asked a Parliamentary question on any one topic, to return an answer on any other."

II

Indigenous to this fruitful soil of the Circumlocution Office and its crop of abuses, is the Merdle type: that type of man of straw, plutocratic, villainous and op-

pressive, which finds its supreme expression in the person of a Whitaker Wright or a Jabez Balfour, to name but two of the infamous horde who flourish like the green bay tree under our modern, capitalistic speculative system. Of the influence of this type, Dickens says:—

"That it is at least as difficult to stay a moral infection as a physical one; that such a disease will spread with the malignity and rapidity of the Plague; that the contagion, when it has once made head, will spare no pursuit or condition, but will lay hold on people in the soundest health, and become developed in the most unlikely constitutions, is a fact as firmly established by experience as that we human creatures breathe an atmosphere. A blessing beyond appreciation would be conferred upon mankind, if the tainted, in whose weakness or wickedness these virulent disorders are bred, could be instantly seized and placed in close confinement (not to say summarily smothered) before the poison is communicable.

"As a vast fire will fill the air to a great distance with its roar, so the sacred flame which the mighty Barnacles had fanned caused the air to resound more and more with the name of Merdle. There never was, there never had been, there never again should be, such a man as Mr. Merdle. Nobody . . . knew what he had done; but everybody knew him to be the greatest that had happened.

"Down in Bleeding Heart Yard, where there was not one unappropriated halfpenny, as lively an interest was taken in this paragon of men as on the Stock Exchange. Mrs. Plornish . . . with her little old father and Maggy acting as assistants, habitually held forth about him over the counter, in conversation with her customers. Mr. Plornish, who had a small share in a small builder's business in the neighbourhood, said, trowel in hand, on the tops of scaffolds and on the tiles of houses, that

people did tell him that Mr. Merdle was *the* one, mind you, to put us all to rights in respects of that which all on us looked to, and to bring us all safe home as much we needed, mind you, fur toe be brought. Mr. Baptist . . . was reputed in whispers to lay by the savings which were the result of his simple and moderate life, for investment in one of Mr. Merdle's certain enterprises. The female Bleeding Hearts, when they came for ounces of tea and hundredweights of talk, gave Mrs. Plornish to understand, That how, ma'am, they had heard from their cousin Mary Anne, which worked in the line, that his lady's dresses would fill three waggons. That how she was as handsome a lady, ma'am, as lived, no matter wheres, and a busk like marble itself. That how, according to what they was told, ma'am, it was her son by a former husband as was took into the Government; and a General he had been, and armies he had marched again and victory crowned, if all you heard was to be believed. That how it was reported that Mr. Merdle's words had been, that if they could have made it worth his while to take the whole Government he would have took it without a profit, but that take it he could not and stand a loss. That how it was not to be expected, ma'am, that he should lose by it, his ways being, as you might say and utter no falsehood, paved with gold; but how it was much to be regretted that something handsome hadn't been got up to make it worth his while; for it was such and only such that know'd the heighth to which the bread and butcher's meat had rose, and it was such and only such that both could and would bring that heighth down. . . .

"Mr. Merdle was immensely rich; a man of prodigious enterprise; a Midas without the ears, who turned all that he touched to gold. He was in everything good, from banking to building. He was in Parliament, of course. He was in the City necessarily. He was Chairman of this, Trustee of that, President of the other. . . . He

was the most disinterested of men—did everything for society, and got as little for himself out of all his gain and care, as a man might.

"That is to say, it may be supposed that he got all he wanted, otherwise with unlimited wealth he would have got it. But his desire was to the utmost to satisfy Society (whatever that was) and take up all its drafts upon him for tribute. He did not shine in company; he had not very much to say for himself; he was a reserved man, with a broad, overhanging, watchful head, that particular kind of dull red colour in his cheeks which is rather stale than fresh, and a somewhat uneasy expression about his coat-cuffs, as if they were in his confidence, and had reasons for being anxious to hide his hands. In the little he said, he was a pleasant man enough; plain, emphatic about public and private confidence, and tenacious of the utmost deference being shown by every one, in all things, to Society. In this same Society . . . he hardly seemed to enjoy himself much, and was mostly to be found behind doors and against walls. Also when he went out to it, instead of its coming home to him, he seemed a little fatigued, and upon the whole rather more disposed for bed; but he was always cultivating it nevertheless, and always moving in it, and always laying out money on it with the greatest liberality. . . .

"Mr. Merdle, left alone . . . looked out of nine windows in succession, and appeared to see nine wastes of space. When he had thus entertained himself he went downstairs and looked intently at all the carpets on the ground-floor; and then came upstairs again, and looked intently at all the carpets on the first-floor, as if they were gloomy depths, in unison with his oppressed soul. Through all the rooms he wandered, as he always did, like the last person on earth who had any business to approach them. Let Mrs. Merdle announce, with all her might, that she was At Home ever so many

nights in a season, she could not announce more widely and unmistakably than Mr. Merdle did that he was never at home.

"At last he met the chief butler, the sight of which splendid retainer always finished him. Extinguished by this great creature, he sneaked to his dressing-room and there remained shut up until he rode out to dinner with Mrs. Merdle in her own handsome chariot. At dinner, he was envied and flattered as a being of might, was Treasuried, Barred, and Bishoped, as much as he would; and an hour after midnight came home alone, and being instantly put out again in his own hall, like a rushlight, by the chief butler, went sighing to bed. . . .

"Mr. Merdle issued invitations for a Barnacle dinner. Lord Decimus was to be there, Mr. Tite Barnacle was to be there, the pleasant young Barnacle was to be there; and the Chorus of Parliamentary Barnacles who went about the provinces when the House was up, warbling the praises of their Chief, were to be represented there. It was understood to be a great occasion. Mr. Merdle was going to take up the Barnacles. Some delicate little negotiations had occurred between him and the noble Decimus . . . and Mr. Merdle had decided to cast the weight of his great probity and great riches into the Barnacle scale. Jobbery was suspected by the malicious; perhaps because it was indisputable that if the adherence of the Immortal Enemy of Mankind could have been secured by a job, the Barnacles would have jobbed him—for the good of the country, for the good of the country. . . .

"Mr. Merdle stood in one of his drawing-rooms, with his back to the fire, waiting for the arrival of his important guests. He seldom or never took the liberty of standing with his back to the fire, unless he was quite alone. In the presence of the Chief Butler he could not have done such a deed. He would have clasped himself by the wrists in that constabulary manner of his, and have

paced up and down the hearthrug, or gone creeping about among the rich objects of furniture, if his oppressive retainer had appeared in the room at that very moment. The sly shadows which seemed to dart out of hiding when the fire rose, and to dart back into it when the fire fell, were sufficient witnesses of his making himself so easy."

But :—

"The famous name of Merdle became, every day, more famous in the land. Nobody knew that the Merdle of such high renown had ever done any good to anyone, alive or dead, or to any earthly thing; nobody knew that he had any capacity or utterance of any sort in him, which had ever thrown, for any creature, the feeblest farthing candle ray of light on any path of duty or diversion, pain or pleasure, toil or rest, fact or fancy, among the multiplicity of paths in the labyrinth trodden by the sons of Adam; nobody had the smallest reason for supposing the clay of which this object of worship was made, to be other than the commonest clay, with as clogged a wick smouldering inside of it as ever kept an image of humanity from tumbling to pieces. All people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich; and, for that reason alone, prostrated themselves before him, more degradedly and less excusably than the darkest savage who creeps out of his hole in the ground to propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul."

This pitiable wretch, this miserable, spiritless scoundrel, dies at last by his own hand. And then :—

"The report that the great man was dead got about with astonishing rapidity . . . appalling whispers [began] to circulate. . . . At first they were faint, and went no further than a doubt whether Mr. Merdle's wealth would be found to be as vast as had been supposed; whether there might not be a temporary difficulty in "realizing" it; whether there might not

be even a temporary suspension (say a month or so) on the part of the wonderful Bank. As the whispers became louder, as they did from that time, every minute, they became more threatening. He had sprung from nothing, by no natural growth or process that anyone could account for; he had been, after all, a low ignorant fellow; he had been a down-looking man, and no one had ever been able to catch his eye; he had been taken up by all sorts of people, in quite an unaccountable manner; he had never had any money of his own, his ventures had been utterly reckless, and his expenditure had been most enormous. In steady progression, as the day declined, the talk rose in sound and purpose. . . . Numbers of men in every profession and trade would be blighted by his insolvency; old people who had been in easy circumstances all their lives would have no place of repentance for their trust in him but the workhouse; legions of women and children would have their whole future desolated by the hand of this mighty scoundrel. Every partaker of his magnificent feasts would be seen to have been a sharer in the plunder of innumerable homes; every servile worshipper of riches who had helped to set him on his pedestal, would have done better to worship the Devil point-blank. So, the talk, lashed louder and higher by confirmation on confirmation, and by edition after edition of the evening papers, swelled into such a roar when night came, as might have brought one to believe that a solitary watcher on the gallery above the Dome of Saint Paul's would have perceived the night air to be laden with a heavy muttering of the name of Merdle, coupled with every form of execration.

"For, by that time it was known that the late Mr. Merdle's Complaint had been simply, Forgery and Robbery. He, the uncouth object of such widespread adulation, the sitter at great men's feasts, the roe's egg of great ladies' assemblies, the subduer of exclusiveness, the leveller of pride, the patron of patrons, the bargain-

driver with a Minister for Lordships of the Circumlocution Office, the recipient of more acknowledgment within some ten or fifteen years at most, than had been bestowed in England upon all peaceful public benefactors and upon all the leaders of all the Arts and Sciences, with all their works to testify for them, during two centuries, at least—he, the shining wonder, the new constellation to be followed by the wise men, bringing gifts, until it stopped over certain carrion at the bottom of a bath and disappeared—was simply the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows."

III

But there are other passages in *Little Dorrit* that are not less pregnant with a rich suggestiveness in their denunciation of rabid sour Sabbatarians and other tyrannical arbiters of public opinion who would order the lives of the people as they would order a suit of clothes for a pauper, or a livery for a servant. Here is one picture, indelibly limned in on the memory.

"It was Sunday evening in London, gloomy, close, and stale. Maddening church bells of all degrees of dissonance, sharp and flat, cracked and clear, fast and slow, made the brick-and-mortar echoes hideous. Melancholy streets in a penitential garb of soot, steeped the souls of the people who were condemned to look at them out of windows, in dire despondency. In every thoroughfare, up almost every alley, and down almost every turning, some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling, as if the Plague were in the city and the dead-carts were going round. Everything was bolted and barred, that could by possibility furnish relief to an overworked people. No pictures, no unfamiliar animals, no rare plants or flowers, no natural or artificial wonders of the ancient world—all taboo with that enlightened strictness, that the ugly South Sea gods in the British

Museum might have supposed themselves at home again. Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to change the brooding mind, or raise it up. Nothing for the spent toiler to do, but to compare the monotony of his seventh day with the monotony of his six days, think what a weary life he led, and make the best of it—or the worst, according to the probabilities.

" At such a happy time, so propitious to the interests of religion and morality, Mr. Arthur Clennam . . . sat in the window of a coffee-house on Ludgate Hill. Ten thousand responsible houses surrounded him, frowning as heavily on the streets they composed, as if they were every one inhabitated by the ten men of the Calendar's story, who blackened their faces and bemoaned their miseries every night. Fifty thousand lairs surrounded him where people lived so unwholesomely, that fair water put into their crowded rooms on Saturday night would be corrupt on Sunday morning ; albeit my lord, their county member, was amazed that they failed to sleep in company with their butcher's meat. Miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped for air, stretched far away towards every point of the compass. Through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river. What secular want could the million or so of human beings, whose daily labour, six days in the week, lay among these Arcadian objects, from the sweet sameness of which they had no escape between the cradle and the grave—what secular want could they possibly have upon their seventh day ? Clearly they could want nothing but a stringent policeman. . . . ' Heaven forgive me,' said he, ' and those who trained me. How I have hated this day ! ' "

He recalls a long train of miserable Sundays.

" There was the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands before him, scared out of his senses

by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was going to Perdition ?—a piece of curiosity that he really in a frock and drawers was not in a condition to satisfy—and which, for the further attraction of his infant mind, had a parenthesis in every other line with some such hiccupping reference as 2 Ep. Thess., c. iii., v. 6 and 7. There was the sleepy Sunday of his boyhood, when, like a military deserter, he was marched to chapel by a picquet of teachers three times a day, morally handcuffed to another boy ; and when he would willingly have bartered two meals of indigestible sermon for another ounce or two of inferior mutton at his scanty dinner in the flesh. There was the interminable Sunday of his nonage, when his mother, stern of face and unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a bible—bound, like her own construction of it, in the hardest, barest, and straitest boards, with one dinted ornament on the cover like the drag of a chain, and a wrathful sprinkling of red upon the edges of the leaves—as if it, of all books, were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse. There was the resentful Sunday of a little later, when he sat glowering and glooming through the tardy length of the day, with a sullen sense of injury in his heart, and no more real knowledge of the beneficent history of the New Testament, than if he had been bred among idolaters. There was a legion of Sundays, all days of unserviceable bitterness and mortification, slowly passing before him."

Of the dread priestess of this cult it is written :—

" Woe unto the suppliant, if such a one there were or ever had been, who had any concession to look for in that inexorable face. Woe to the defaulter whose appeal lay to the tribunal where those severe eyes presided. Great need had the rigid woman of her mystical religion, veiled in gloom and darkness, with

lightnings of cursing, vengeance, and destruction, flashing through the sable clouds. Forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors, was a prayer too poor in spirit for her. Smite thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them; do Thou as I would do, and Thou shalt have my worship: this was the impious tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven."

In other regards, also, is Dickens's purpose plain and steadfast in the direction of a better adjustment of human values, and a juster conception of the worthy and the unworthy among mankind; and this notably in his depiction of the patriarchal Casby:—

"Patriarch was the name which many people delighted to give him. Various old ladies in the neighbourhood spoke of him as the Last of the Patriarchs. So grey, so slow, so quiet, so impassionate, so very bumpy in the head, Patriarch was the word for him. He had been accosted in the streets, and respectfully solicited to become a Patriarch for sculptors and for painters; with so much importunity, in sooth, that it would appear to be beyond the Fine Arts to remember the points of a Patriarch, or to invent one. Philanthropists of both sexes had asked who he was, and on being informed, 'Old Christopher Casby, formerly Town-agent to Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle,' had cried in a rapture of disappointment, 'Oh! why, with that head, is he not a benefactor to his species! Oh! why, with that head, is he not a father to the orphan and a friend to the friendless!' With that head, however, he remained old Christopher Casby, proclaimed by common report rich in house property, and with that head, he now sat in his silent parlour. Indeed it would be the height of unreason to expect him to be sitting there without that head. . . .

"His smooth face had a bloom upon it like ripe wall-fruit. What with his blooming face, and that head, and his blue eyes, he seemed to be delivering

sentiments of rare wisdom and virtue. In like manner, his physiognomical expression seemed to teem with benignity. Nobody could have said where the wisdom was, or where the virtue was, or where the benignity was; but they all seemed to be somewhere about him. . . .

"When he made one of these little repetitions, sitting with his hands crossed before him, he did it with his head on one side, and a gentle smile, as if he had something in his thoughts too sweetly profound to be put into words. As if he had denied himself the pleasure of uttering it, lest he should soar too high; and his meekness therefore preferred to be unmeaning. . . .

"Now, in the old days at home, certain audacious doubts respecting the Last of the Patriarchs, which were afloat in the air, had, by some forgotten means, come in contact with Arthur's sensorium. He was aware of motes and specks of suspicion in the atmosphere of that time, seen through which medium, Christopher Casby was a mere Inn-signpost without any Inn—an invitation to rest and be thankful, where there was no place to put up at, and nothing whatever to be thankful for. He knew that some of these specks even represented Christopher as capable of harbouring designs in 'that head,' and as being a crafty impostor. Other motes there were which showed him as a heavy, selfish, drifting Booby, who, having stumbled, in the course of his unwieldy jostlings against other men, on the discovery that to get through life with ease and credit, he had but to hold his tongue, keep the bald part of his head well polished, and leave his hair alone, had had just cunning enough to seize the idea and stick to it. It was said that his being Town-agent to Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle was referable, not to his having the least business capacity, but to his looking so supremely benignant that nobody could suppose the property screwed or jobbed under such a man;

also, that for similar reasons, he now got more money out of his own wretched lettings, unquestioned, than anybody with a less nobby and less shining crown could possibly have done. In a word, it was represented . . . that many people select their models, much as the painters just now mentioned select theirs; and that, whereas in the Royal Academy some evil old ruffian of a Dog-stealer will annually be found embodying all the cardinal virtues, on account of his eyelashes, or his chin, or his legs (thereby planting thorns of confusion in the breasts of the more observant students of nature), so, in the great social Exhibition, accessories are often accepted in lieu of the internal character."

Equally abhorrent and objectionable in her different way is the unspeakable Mrs. General. She

"had no opinions. Her way of forming a mind was to prevent it from forming opinions. She had a little circular set of mental grooves or rails on which she started little trains of other people's opinions, which never overtook one another, and never got anywhere. Even her propriety could not dispute that there was impropriety in the world; but Mrs. General's way of getting rid of it was to put it out of sight, and make believe that there was no such thing. This was another of her ways of forming a mind—to cram all articles of difficulty into cupboards, lock them up, and say they had no existence. It was the easiest way, and beyond all comparison, the properest.

"Mrs. General was not to be told of anything shocking. Accidents, miseries, and offences were never to be mentioned before her. Passion was to go to sleep in the presence of Mrs. General, and blood was to change to milk and water. The little that was left in the world, when all these deductions were made, it was Mrs. General's province to varnish. In that formative process of hers, she dipped the smallest of brushes into the largest of pots, and varnished the surface of

every object that came under consideration. The more cracked it was, the more Mrs. General varnished it. . . .

"'Papa is a preferable mode of address,' observed Mrs. General [resenting Little Dorrit's use of the plebeian word Father]. 'Father is rather vulgar, my dear. The word Papa, besides, gives a pretty form to the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism, are all very good words for the lips; especially prunes and prism. You will find it serviceable, in the formation of a demeanour, if you sometimes say to yourself in company —on entering a room, for instance—Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism.'"

Of the rest of the book there is no time or space at my disposal in which to say more than this: That though *Little Dorrit* perhaps lacks a little in lightness and zest, and so can never be one of the most attractive or the most popular of Dickens's novels, it contains a feast of many courses—all appetizing to the palate of the social reformer and the social observer—which renders it an indispensable item in the literary equipment of every Socialist who is also an admirer of Dickens.

CHAPTER XII

"A TALE OF TWO CITIES" AND "THE CHRISTMAS STORIES"

I

IN *A Tale of Two Cities* Dickens, in his own words, set himself the little task of making a picturesque story, rising in every chapter, with characters true to nature, but whom the story should express more than they should express themselves in dialogue. "I mean," he says, "in other words, that I thought a story of incident might be written (in place of the odious stuff that is written under that pretence), pounding the characters in its own mortar, and beating their interest out of them." And Forster adds, pertinently enough in the main :—

"There is no instance in his novels, excepting this, of a deliberate and planned departure from the method of treatment which had been pre-eminently the source of his popularity as a novliest. To rely less upon character than upon incident, and to resolve that his actors should be expressed by the story more than they should express themselves by dialogue, was for him a hazardous, and can hardly be called an entirely successful, experiment. With singular dramatic vivacity, much constructive art, and with descriptive passages of a high order everywhere . . . there was probably never a book by a great humourist, and an artist so prolific in the conception of character, with so little humour and with so few rememberable figures. Its merits lie elsewhere. Though there are excellent

traits and touches all through the revolutionary scenes, the only full-length that stands out prominently is the picture of the wasted life saved at last by heroic self-sacrifice."

I should prefer myself to say that its distinctive merit is less in any of its conceptions of character, even Carton's, than as a specimen of Dickens's power in sheer imaginative fiction-spinning. Indeed, this book, though in itself a triumphant vindication of Dickens's right to the full title and rank of Artist, has always seemed to the present writer a misdirection of energy, a superb waste of precious time. Conceivably the story as it stands could hardly have been better told. There are few redundancies of any sort in this romance, such as we look for—and delight in—in Dickens's more characteristic novels. Every stroke tells. Every incident, almost every utterance, has its necessary place in the story. From the first page to the last the events march in orderly progression to an inevitable denouement. As a piece of literary artistry, therefore, let it be repeated that *A Tale of Two Cities* is a very masterpiece and does not suffer by comparison with any work in its own genre in the language. But just inasmuch as it lacks the faults, so does it lack the virtues of Dickens's more typical work. For, take away the defects of technique, those literary blemishes on which Dickens's detractors are so fond of laying stress, and what remains? You might as well strip Shakespeare of his Falstaffian exaggerations, his splendid extravagances, his tendency to caricature, his insistence on personal characteristics, his damnable iteration of words and phrases, his poetic digressions; and so, by pruning and lopping and trimming his work, try to bring it to an academic perfection. It is the peculiar prerogative of genius to succeed by virtue of transgressions of those very canons of excellence which the quidnuncs do so love to set up for the safe guidance of mediocrity.

There is no supremely great work in literature or art that the pundits cannot pull to pieces with their critical pincers, or prove to be false to every standard that their mathematically-exact instruments of torture have contrived. But genius is not thus to be lightly estimated in the balances and sent flying into the infinite inane by the opinions and verdicts, however weighty, of any body of schoolmen or pedants, logic-choppers or formularists.

A Tale of Two Cities is a book with miraculously few technical faults, and yet it is the least considerable of Dickens's books. It is the book that is usually most admired by those who have the least appreciation of Dickens's best qualities; his passionate humanism, his mighty humour, his comprehensive faculty of vision. It is the one book of all his books that we can imagine someone else—some modern literary craftsman—writing . . . and writing equally well, or even better. And for just this reason it falls below the level of the rest of Dickens's books; for just this reason it is the book that has been seized for dramatic misrepresentation in the theatre, and has been sobbed over and gushed over by those who have the feeblest understanding of the real leavening force of all Dickens's work, of which he was apparently more or less unconscious oftentimes, but in which lay the secret of his irresistible appeal to the multitude of his readers; that force which drove him straight in the direction of the regeneration of society, and especially in the direction of the emancipation of the poor and oppressed, the misunderstood and the disregarded units of our civilization.

A Tale of Two Cities has its place in this present enterprise chiefly on account of the point of view it emphasizes in its impressions and its more detailed descriptions of the condition of the French proletariat before and during the Reign of Terror. These pictures seem to bite into the memory as the acid bites into the copper and to leave

an indelible impression that transmits itself to any surface against which it is brought. Here, for example, is a picture of Saint Antoine's, a strongly disaffected suburb of Paris :—

"And now that the cloud settled on Saint Antoine, which a momentary gleam had driven from his sacred countenance, the darkness of it was heavy—cold, dirt, sickness, ignorance, and want were the lords in waiting on the saintly presence—nobles of great power all of them; but most especially the last. Samples of a people that had undergone a terrible grinding and re-grinding in the mill, and certainly not in the fabulous mill which ground old people young, shivered at every corner, passed in and out at every doorway, looked from every window, fluttered in every vestige of a garment that the wind shook. The mill that had worked them down was the mill that grinds young people old; the children had ancient faces and grave voices; and upon them, and upon the grown faces, and ploughed into every furrow of age and coming up afresh, was the sign, Hunger. It was prevalent everywhere. Hunger was pushed out of the tall houses, in the wretched clothing that hung upon poles and lines; Hunger was patched into them with straw and rag and wood and paper; Hunger was repeated in every fragment of the small modicum of firewood that the man sawed off; Hunger stared down from the smokeless chimneys, and started up from the filthy street that had no offal, among its refuse, of anything to eat. Hunger was the inscription on the baker's shelves, written in every small loaf of his scanty stock of bad bread; at the sausage-shop, in every dead-dog preparation that was offered for sale. Hunger rattled its dry bones among the roasted chestnuts in the turned cylinder; Hunger was shred into atomies in every farthing porringer of husky chips of potato, fried with some reluctant drops of oil."

Contrast with this picture the scene of a fashionable reception held at a grand hotel in the same city.

"But the comfort was that all the company at the grand hotel of Monseigneur were perfectly dressed. If the Day of Judgment had only been ascertained to be a dress day, everybody there would have been eternally correct. Such frizzing and powdering and sticking up of hair, such delicate complexions artificially preserved and mended, such gallant swords to look at, and such delicate honour to the sense of smell, would surely keep everything going for ever and ever. The exquisite gentlemen of the finest breeding wore little pendent trinkets that chinked as they languidly moved; these golden fetters rang like precious little bells; and what with that ringing, and the rustle of silk and brocade and fine linen, there was a flutter in the air that fanned Saint Antoine and his devouring hunger far away."

And then this scene:—

"With a wild rattle and clatter, and an inhuman abandonment of consideration not easy to be understood in these days" [Dickens, of course, knew nothing of motor-cars] "the carriage dashed through streets and swept round corners, with women screaming before it, and men clutching each other and clutching children out of its way. At last, swooping at a street corner by a fountain, one of its wheels came to a sickening little jolt, and there was a loud cry from a number of voices, and the horses reared and plunged.

"But for the latter inconvenience, the carriage would probably not have stopped; carriages were often known to drive on and leave their wounded behind, and why not? But the frightened valet had got down in a hurry, and there were twenty hands at the horses' bridles.

"'What has gone wrong?' said Monsieur, calmly looking out.

"A tall man in a nightcap had caught up a bundle from among the feet of the horses, and had laid it on

the basement of the fountain, and was down in the mud and the wet, howling over it like a wild animal.

"'Pardon, Monsieur the Marquis!' said a ragged and submissive man, 'it is his child.'

"'Why does he make that abominable noise? Is it his child?'

"'Excuse me, Monsieur the Marquis—it is a pity—yes.'

"The fountain was a little removed; for the street opened, where it was, into a space of some ten or twelve yards square. As the tall man suddenly got up from the ground, and came running at the carriage, Monsieur the Marquis clapped his hand for an instant on his sword-hilt.

"'Killed!' shrieked the man, in wild desperation, extending both arms at their length above his head, and staring at him. 'Dead!'

"The people closed round and looked at Monsieur the Marquis. . . . He took out his purse.

"'It is extraordinary to me,' said he, 'that you people cannot take care of yourselves and your children. One or the other of you is forever in the way. How do I know what injury you have done my horses? See! Give him that.'

"He threw out a gold coin for the valet to pick up, and all the heads craned forward that all the eyes might look down at it as it fell. The tall man called out again with a most unearthly cry, 'Dead!'"

Thus the French aristocracy sowed their seed of dragon's teeth; and inevitably, when the Revolution came, they reaped the predestined harvest. Here are some scenes, culled from the pictures Dickens gives us of that epoch, hardly less abhorrent and horrible than this last:—

"Saint Antoine had been, that morning, a vast dusky mass of scarecrows heaving to and fro, with frequent gleams of light above the billowy heads, where

steel blades and bayonets shone in the sun. A tremendous roar arose from the throat of Saint Antoine, and a forest of naked arms struggled in the air like shrivelled branches of a tree in a winter wind: all the fingers convulsively clutching at every weapon or semblance of a weapon that was thrown up from the depths below, no matter how far off.

"Who gave them out, whence they last came, where they began, through what agency they crookedly quivered and jerked, scores at a time, over the heads of the crowd, like a kind of lightning, no eye in the throng could have told; but muskets were being distributed—so were cartridges, powder, and ball, bars of iron and wood, knives, axes, pikes, every weapon that distracted ingenuity could discover or devise. People who could lay hold of nothing else, set themselves with bleeding limbs to force stones and bricks out of their places in walls. Every pulse and heart in Saint Antoine was on fever-high strain and at fever-high heat. Every living creature there held life as of no account, and was demented with a passionate readiness to sacrifice it. . . .

"The men were terrible, in the bloody-minded anger with which they looked from windows, caught up what arms they had, and came pouring down into the streets; but the women were a sight to chill the boldest. From such household occupations as their bare poverty yielded, from their children, from their aged and their sick crouching on the bare ground, famished and naked, they ran out with streaming hair, urging one another, and themselves, to madness, with the wildest cries and actions. . . .

"A throng of men and women . . . had rushed in to work at the grindstone . . . such awful workers, and such awful work!

"The grindstone had a double handle, and turning at it madly were two men whose faces, as their long hair

flapped back when the whirlings of the grindstone brought their faces up, were more horrible and cruel than the visages of the wildest savages in their most barbarous disguise. False eyebrows and false moustaches were stuck upon them, and their hideous countenances were all bloody and sweaty, and all awry with howling, and all staring and glaring with beastly excitement and want of sleep. As these ruffians turned and turned, their matted locks now flung forward over their eyes, now flung backward over their necks, some women held wine to their mouths that they might drink; and what with dropping blood, and what with dropping wine, all their wicked atmosphere seemed gore and fire. The eye could not detect one creature in the group free from the smear of blood. Shouldering one another to get next at the sharpening-stone, were men stripped to the waist, with the stain all over their limbs and bodies; men in all sorts of rags, with the stain upon those rags; men devilishly set off with the spoils of women's lace and silk and ribbon, with the stain dyeing those trifles through and through. Hatchets, knives, bayonets, swords, all brought to be sharpened, were all red with it. Some of the hacked swords were tied to the wrists of those who carried them, with strips of linen and fragments of dress; ligatures various in kind, but all deep of the one colour. And as the frantic wielders of these weapons snatched them from the stream of sparks and tore away into the streets, the same red hue was red in their frenzied eyes—eyes which any un-brutalized beholder would have given twenty years of life, to petrify with a well-directed gun."

In that last half-dozen words we see how Dickens still clung to the old conventionalism which had clouded his vision all his life and blurred to his sight the truer, deeper significance of some of the human phenomena with which he was confronted, and from which his

searching curious gaze could never avert itself, however much it might be revolted. That same strange affliction of purblindness, of a moral obliquity, manifests itself again and again—as in this picture of the dread tribunal at the Conciergerie :—

" The Judges sat upon the Bench in feathered hats ; but the rough red cap and tricoloured cockade was the head-dress otherwise prevailing. Looking at the Jury and the turbulent audience, one might have thought that the usual order of things was reversed, and that the felons were trying the honest men. The lowest, cruellest, and worst populace of a city, never without its quality of low, cruel, and bad, were the directing spirits of the scene : noisily commenting, applauding, disapproving, anticipating and precipitating the result without a check."

There is something lacking of charity, even of a right perception, in that biassed view of the situation. No account is taken of the provocation that had induced this lust of slaughter, or of the poetic justice of this reversal of the tables of the law. In another place Dickens seems even to lament the destruction of that power of Individualism which had, in reality, destroyed itself by its own excesses.

" What private solicitude could rear itself against the deluge of the Year One of Liberty—the deluge rising from below, not falling from above, and with the windows of Heaven shut, not opened !

" There was no pause, no pity, no peace, no interval of relenting rest, no measurement of time. Though days and nights circled as regularly as when time was young and the evening and the morning were the first day, other count of time there was none. Hold of it was lost in the raging fever of a Nation, as it is in the fever of one patient. Now, breaking the unnatural silence of a whole city, the executioner showed the people the head of the king—and now, it seemed almost

in the same breath, the head of his fair wife which had had eight weary months of imprisoned widowhood and misery to turn it grey.

"And yet, observing the strange law of contradiction which obtains in all such cases, the time was long, while it flamed by so fast. A revolutionary tribunal in the capital, and forty or fifty thousand revolutionary committees all over the land; a law of the Suspected, which struck away all security for liberty or life, and delivered over any good and innocent person who had committed no offence, and could obtain no hearing; these things became the established order and nature of appointed things, and seemed to be ancient usage before they were many weeks old."

But what of the disorder that these things had superseded? Had not that also struck away all security for liberty and delivered over good and innocent persons to a death-in-life, who had committed only the offence of being born of poor and lowly parents? Dickens did not, could not, would not see the light that his study of the French Revolution should have flashed upon him, because of the blindness that was upon him also, in common with the rest of the nation.

II

Dickens wrote five moderately long Christmas books—*A Christmas Carol*, *The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Battle of Life*, and *The Haunted Man*—besides a number of shorter ones, including such memorable favourites as *Boots at the Holly Tree Inn*, *Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions*, *Mrs. Lirriper*, and *The Seven Poor Travellers;* but I am uneasily suspicious that one or two of these latter were written primarily for platform-delivery. Some brief consideration of the first five, however, is introduced here, first, because this chapter seems to present a suitable opportunity; and secondly,

because they were also experiments—in a kind of realistic fantasy; as *A Tale of Two Cities* was an experiment in realistic romance; and so they all occupy a position in the catalogue of Dickens's works that sets them apart from the bulk of his novels.

It is often said in jest that Dickens invented Christmas. It might be said in all seriousness that he undoubtedly did a great deal to revive the vogue of those humane and kindly sentiments with which that season is still fondly associated. There seemed a possibility, in his time, that the annual merry-making might soon perish of inanition under the sour Victorian blight of harsh religiosity and narrow materialism which cast so cold and dark a shadow over the national life of the middle of the nineteenth century. The people were being harassed and vexed by a puritanical creed of self-suppression that was like to thin and impoverish their old full-bloodedness and to put an end, once for all, to their old hearty coarse manners and customs. The dogmas of a bigoted perversion of Christian tenets were being insisted on to the detriment of the truer teaching of Christ as he expounded it at the marriage in Cana of Galilee. A priceless opportunity of serving the cause of peace on earth and good will to all men was being thrown away for a handful of empty, dry husks. The feasting and the junketing, the prodigality and the hospitality that the season of Christmas had hitherto stood as an excuse for, were being whittled down to a mere priestly observance of rites and ceremonies that were in themselves cold and meaningless, and made no strong appeal to the social instincts of the common people. Dickens perceived that one might quite well avoid exalting the perhaps over-licentious methods, the gluttony and the drunkenness, that were of old resorted to as immemorial practices in the due and fitting celebration of the nativity of Christ, without at the same time condemning these practices altogether, and so sacrificing

the finer impulses and feelings that they did undoubtedly generate in the people's hearts, and losing sight of the splendid significance that permeated all the rather senseless and riotous revelry that they gave rise to. And despite all that may be urged against the position that Dickens took up in this regard by those who are enamoured of various self-denying ordinances, it does seem to many that Dickens was entirely justified in doing all that lay in his power to revive the ancient spirit of Yule-tide. The value of a rallying cry, of an emblem, of flags and banners and mottoes and music, and all the rest of the paraphernalia that go to the fostering of a popular ideal, is too often overlooked by the many social reformers who conserve their heat for their arguments and expel it from their blood. There are times when it is better, in the interests of a cause, to be frivolous and gay, than wise and sober and austere. No delegate who took part in the carnival at the International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart in 1907 can deny that we grew to a better understanding of one another and established a closer inter-racial *rapprochement* on that occasion than any of the proceedings of the stately Liederhalle had shown any signs of bringing about. And it is just this realization of the truth that whilst fellowship and brotherhood starve on a windy diet of closely-reasoned theories and wire-drawn principles, however right and just and admirable they may be, it will wax and grow and fructify abundantly by the subtle agency of such sentiments and emotions as moments of irresponsible jollity and joyous abandonment invariably provoke. We do not want, no cause demands that we should forever sit with our forefingers at our foreheads, pondering problems and devising schemes in a mood of philosophic detachment. We want rather to show that the happy state we so ardently desire to bring about, and to which all our energies are bent, is foreshadowed in our own conduct of our own

lives. If we are villains—as our enemies declare—then let us smile and smile and keep on smiling till the people recognize that we are at least merry villains and ask to share in our merry villainy.

There has lately been published in the *Nineteenth Century* an article by Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton, in which he recalls the death of Dickens, that aptly summarizes the Master's efforts toward the promotion of the old spirit of Christmas :—

"On that never-to-be-forgotten summer day when London was robbed of Charles Dickens (says he) I was walking disconsolately down Drury Lane, when I heard a girl with a shawl over her head, standing at the corner of one of the side streets and talking to a companion, exclaim : 'Dickens dead ? Then will Father Christmas die too ?' . . . Thus, then, Dickens had become 'a myth of the people' before his death. It is probable that this girl had never read the Christmas Books.

Upon this text, "Dickens dead ? Then will Father Christmas die too ?" Mr. Watts-Dunton wrote the following sonnet, which was published in the *Athenæum*, with the title "Dickens Returns on Christmas Day" :—

"Dickens is dead!" Beneath that grievous cry
London seemed shivering in the summer heat;
Strangers took up the tale like friends that meet;
"Dickens is dead!" said they, and hurried by;
Street children stopped their games—they knew not why,
But some new night seemed darkening down the street.
A girl in rags, staying her way-worn feet,
Cried, "Dickens dead ? Will Father Christmas die ?"
City he loved, take courage on thy way!
He loves thee still, in all thy joys and fears.
Though he whose smile made bright thine eyes of grey—
Though he whose voice, uttering thy burthened years,
Made laughter bubble through thy sea of tears—
Is gone, Dickens returns on Christmas Day.

And would that Socialism, by means of some similar "myth of the people," were identified with the humanizing spirit of this most joyous of all anniversaries !

But the Christmas Books wait.

What was said of the first of the series, *A Christmas Carol*, might be said with equal force of them all. "Blessings on your kind heart," wrote Jeffrey to the author. "You should be happy yourself, for you may be sure you have done more good by this little publication, fostered more kindly feelings, and prompted more positive acts of beneficence, than can be traced to all the pulpits and confessionals in Christendom. . . ." "Who can listen," asked Thackeray, "to objections regarding such a book as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it, a personal kindness." In Forster's words, the *Christmas Carols* told the selfish man to rid himself of selfishness; the just man to make himself generous; and the good-natured man to enlarge the sphere of his good-nature. Its cheery voice of faith and hope, ringing from one end of the island to the other, carried pleasant warning alike to all, that if the duties of Christmas were wanting, no good could come of its outward observances; that it must shine upon the cold hearth and warm it, and into the sorrowful heart and comfort it; that it must be kindness, benevolence, charity, mercy, and forbearance, or its plum-pudding would turn to bile and its roast beef be indigestible.

Of the second book, *The Chimes*, some fuller mention will be made at the end of this chapter. For a moment let us glance at the purpose of one or two of the later Christmas books. *The Cricket on the Hearth* is something more than a mere tale. It has become a household word, a fireside inspiration. Its immediate success exceeded the most sanguine expectations, and it has retained its place and interwoven itself inextricably with the people's very heart strings. It is, as the rest of these books are, a fairy-tale to which the much-abused epithets pure and simple may for once be quite fitly applied; it is a delicate morsel of symbolism, so un-

affected and direct in its human appeal that it might have fallen from Dickens's lips, word by word, without premeditation. "No one," says Forster, "was more intensely fond than Dickens of old nursery-tales, and he had a secret delight in feeling that he was here only giving them a higher form. The social and manly virtues he desired to teach were to him not less the charm of the ghost, the goblin, and the fairy fancies of his childhood, however rudely set forth in those earlier days. What were now to be conquered were the formidable dragons and giants that had their places at our own hearts, and the weapons to be used were of a finer than the 'ice-brook's temper.' With brave and strong restraints, what is evil in ourselves is to be subdued; with warm and gentle sympathies, what is bad or unreclaimed in others was to be redeemed; the Beauty was to embrace the Beast, as in the divinest of all those fables; the star was to rise out of the ashes, as in our much-loved Cinderella; and we were to play the Valentine with our wilder brothers, and bring them back with brotherly care to civilization and happiness. Nor is it to be doubted, I think, that in that largest sense of benefit, great public and private service was done; positive, earnest, practical good; by the extraordinary popularity, and nearly universal acceptance, which attended these little holiday volumes. They carried to countless firesides, with new enjoyment of the season, better apprehension of its claims and obligations; they mingled grave with glad thoughts, much to the advantage of both; what seemed almost too remote to meddle with they brought within reach of the charities, and what was near they touched with a dearer tenderness; they comforted the generous, rebuked the sordid, cured folly by kindly ridicule and comic humour, and saying to their readers, Thus you have done, but it were better thus, may for some have realized the philosopher's famous experience, and by a single fortunate thought

revised the whole manner of a life. Literary criticism here is a second-rate thing."

Of the other Christmas books that may be mentioned in passing, *The Haunted Man* seems to contain the noblest moral in the phrase that forms its colophon, Lord Keep My Memory Green. The hero of this tale is a great chemist, a lecturer at an old foundation, a man of studious habits, haunted by melancholy recollections of the past, thinking his knowledge of the present a worthier substitute, and at last parting with that portion of himself which he thinks he can safely cast away. The recollections are of a great wrong done him in early life, and of all the sorrow consequent upon it; and the ghost he holds nightly conference with is the darker presentment of himself embodied in those bitter recollections. Out of the heaped-up images of wintry and gloomy fancies, the supernatural takes a shape which is not forced or violent; and the dialogue which is no dialogue, but a kind of dreamy, dreary echo is a piece of weird imagination worthy of Poe. The boon desired is granted, and the bargain struck. He is not only to lose his own recollection of grief and wrong, but to destroy the like memory in all whom he approaches. By this means the effect is shown in humble as well as in higher minds, in the worst poverty as in competence and ease, always with the same result. The sage loses his own affections and sympathies, sees them crushed in others, and is brought to the level of the only creature whom he cannot change or influence, an outcast of the streets, a boy whom the mere animal appetites have turned into a small fiend. Never having had his mind awakened, evil is this creature's good; avarice, irreverence, and vindictiveness are his nature; sorrow has no place in his memory; and from his brutish propensities the philosopher can take nothing away. The juxtaposition of two people whom such opposite means have put in the same moral attitude is a

stroke of real genius. And the lesson is luminously plain.

Finally, to pass on, let a word or two be said about *The Chimes:* that fairy-tale, which is possibly too grim and forcible, and too much in the nature of a philippic, for Christmas reading; but which cannot be left out of this review of Dickens as a potential Socialist, because it so neatly and featly outlines his main position of healthy antagonism toward the cant doctrines of average individualism. Apart from the tender simplicity of the book, and its delineation of a handful of types, all intensely lovable in their helplessness and guilelessness in the hands of their pastors and masters, it contains a fierce indictment of the miserably inadequate ameliorative measures beloved of such types of public functionary and administrator as Alderman Cute, Mr. Filer, and Sir Joseph Bowley. First, let the dismal Filer speak:—

"'This is a description of animal food, Alderman,' said Filer . . . 'commonly known to the labouring population of this country by the name of tripe. . . . But who eats tripe? . . . Tripe is without an exception the least economical, and the most wasteful article of consumption that the markets of this country can by possibility produce. The loss upon a pound of tripe has been found to be, in the boiling, seven-eighths of a fifth more than the loss upon a pound of any other animal substance whatever. Tripe is more expensive, properly understood, than the hot-house pine-apple. Taking into account the number of animals slaughtered yearly within the bills of mortality alone; and forming a low estimate of the quantity of tripe which the carcasses of those animals, reasonably well butchered, would yield, I find that the waste on that amount of tripe, if boiled, would victual a garrison of five hundred men for five months of thirty-one days each and a February over. The waste, the waste!'"

Then, Alderman Cute:—

"'Now, you know,' said the Alderman, 'I am a plain man and a practical man; and I go to work in a plain practical way. . . . There's a great deal of nonsense talked about Want . . . and I intend to Put It Down. There's a certain amount of cant in vogue about Starvation, and I mean to Put It Down. Lord bless you . . . you may Put Down anything among this sort of people, if you only know the way to set about it.'"

And last, Sir Joseph:—

"'Your only business, my good fellow . . . your only business in life is with me. You needn't trouble yourself to think about anything. I will think for you. I know what is good for you. I am your perpetual Parent. Such is the dispensation of an all-wise Providence! Now, the design of your creation is—not that you should swill and guzzle, and associate your enjoyments, brutally, with food . . . but that you should feel the Dignity of Labour. Go forth erect into the cheerful morning air, and—and stop there. Live hard and temperately, be respectful, exercise your self-denial, bring up your family on next to nothing, pay your rent as regularly as the clock strikes, be punctual in your dealings . . . and you may trust me to be your Friend and Father.'"

The answer to the various pompous propositions of this most unholy trinity is put into the mouth of one Will Fern.

"'Gentlefolks,' he said, 'you've drunk the Labourer. Look at me! . . . Just come from jail. . . . And neither for the first time, nor the second, nor the third, nor yet the fourth. . . . Look at me! You see I'm at the worst, beyond all hurt or harm; beyond your help; for the time when your kind words or kind actions could have done me good . . . is gone, with the scent of last year's beans or clover on the air. . . . Hear the real Truth spoke out for once! . . . I've lived many a year

in this place. You may see the cottage from the sunk fence over yonder. I've seen the ladies draw it in their books, a hundred times. It looks well in a picter, I've heerd say; but there ain't weather in picters, and may be 'tis fitter for that than for a place to live in. Well, I lived there. How hard—how bitter hard—I lived there, I won't say. Any day in the year, and every day, you can judge for your own selves. . . . 'Tis harder than you think for, gentlefolks, to grow up decent, commonly decent, in such a place. That I growed up a man and not a brute, says something for me—as I was, then. As I am now, there's nothing can be said for me or done for me. I'm past it. . . . I dragged on . . . somehow. Neither me nor any man knows how; but so heavy that I couldn't put a cheerful face upon it, or make believe that I was anything but what I was. Now, gentlemen—you gentlemen that sits at Sessions—when you see a man with discontent writ on his face you says to one another "He's suspicious. I has my doubts," says you, "about Will Fern. Watch that fellow!" I don't say, gentlemen, it ain't quite nat'ral, but I say 'tis so; and from that hour, whatever Will Fern does or lets alone—all one—it goes against him. . . . Now, gentlemen, see how your laws are made to trap and hunt us when we're brought to this. I tries to live elsewhere. And I'm a vagabond. To jail with him! I comes back here. I goes a-nutting in your woods, and breaks—who don't?—a limber branch or two. To jail with him! One of your keepers sees me in the broad day, near my own patch of garden, with a gun. To jail with him! I has a nat'ral angry word with that man, when I'm free again. To jail with him! I cuts a stick. To jail with him! I eats a rotten apple or a turnip. To jail with him! It's twenty mile away; and coming back I begs a trifle on the road. To jail with him! At last, the constable, the keeper—anybody—finds me anywhere, a-doing anything. To

jail with him, for he's a vagrant and a jail-bird known; and jail's the only home he's got. . . . Do I say this to serve my cause? . . . Who can give me back my liberty, who can give me back my good name . . .? Not all the Lords and Ladies in wide England. But, gentlemen, gentlemen, dealing with other men like me, begin at the right end. Give us, in mercy, better homes when we're a-lying in our cradles; give us better food when we're a-working for our lives; give us kinder laws to bring us back when we're a-going wrong; and don't set Jail, Jail, Jail, before us, everywhere we turn. There ain't a condescension you can show the Labourer then, that he won't take, as ready and as grateful as a man can be; for he has a patient, peaceful, willing heart. But you must put his rightful spirit in him first; for whether he's a wreck and ruin such as me, or is like one of them that stand here now, his spirit is divided from you at this time. Bring it back, gentlefolks, bring it back! Bring it back afore the day comes when even his Bible changes in his altered mind, and the words seem to him to read, as they have sometimes read in my own eyes—in Jail: "Whither thou goest I can Not go; where thou lodgest I do Not lodge; thy people are Not my people; Nor thy God my God!"'"

CHAPTER XIII

"GREAT EXPECTATIONS" AND "OUR MUTUAL FRIEND"

I

OF all Dickens's books, *Great Expectations* is the present writer's favourite — as it seems, in his opinion, to be also the best of them all. The best in every way, except—alas!—in a Socialistic way. For it has to be sadly confessed that in *Great Expectations*, on which I feel that I could write and write endlessly and tirelessly, there is little that directly serves my present purpose. *Great Expectations* exposes no abuses, satirizes no shams, champions no forlorn cause—at least, with any sort of particularity. It is just a human document; or, rather, a bundle of human documents, written on my memory in imperishable words. In its exuberant but always sweet and sane humour; in the dignity and poignancy of its pathos; in the faithfulness of its delineation of character; in its power of description and suggestion; in its robust virility of tone; and in the supreme artistry that it displays in every aspect and facet of its construction: it seems to me the greatest and the finest and the strongest, the wisest and the most humanly moving, of all Dickens's novels. The temptation to lapse upon mere eulogy is well-nigh irresistible, in fact; so that I dare not indulge my inclination even to the extent of luxuriating in a few short pages of unstinted praise. A whole volume would be insufficient to express the admiration that I feel for this book.

So I must reluctantly pass it over with just a few meagre sentences.

It must not be supposed, however, that because *Great Expectations* has such a small part in this enterprise it plays a commensurably small part in the revelation of Dickens's personality, or that it is of comparatively little value to the cause of Socialism. It is alight and alive with significance for all who have the vital interests of the commonweal at heart. It is so tenderly merry, so humorously gentle, so kindly and bravely true, so beautiful in its simple faith in human nature and so ennobling in its views toward life, that it must help enormously in the work of universal regeneration and emancipation. In this book Dickens's gift of sympathetic insight transcends itself . . . in the creation of such types as Joe Gargery, the Pocket family, Wemmick and Miss Skiffins and the Aged P.; in its acute analysis of the foibles and idiosyncrasies of a Pumblechook and a Wopsle, a Drummle and a Jaggers, even of Trabb's boy; in its portrayal of the woman of wasted passions, Miss Havisham, brooding, amid the ruined splendour of her hopes, over her undying wrongs, and fashioning the hapless, blighted girl, Estella, whom she has adopted, into a weapon for the slaking of her lust of vengeance—a weapon without a handle, which wounds the hand that would wield it; above all, in its sublime attitude of compassionate tolerance and pity toward the brutalized felon and convict, Magwitch, with its sober and grave perception of the underlying good in him so strangely and disastrously intermingled with the bad. The very soul of true Christian charity shines through Dickens's sorrowful understanding and forgiveness of this lost human derelict, whom a prompting of gratitude rescues from the loathsome abyss of an utter degradation.

But no extracts, however carefully compiled; no quotations, however judiciously selected and blent;

and certainly no words of the mere commentator, can hope even dimly to shadow forth the true worth of this book.

II

So we pass, then, to *Our Mutual Friend*, the last of the novels to be dealt with here, in any detail, as it was the last that Dickens completed.

Whilst he was writing this book there is little doubt that he had some forewarning of his approaching death. "If I were not going away now," he writes in 1865, during the publication of the book in monthly parts, "I should break down. No one knows as I know to-day how near to it I have been." And this foreboding that the work of his life was drawing to its close affected him very deeply. "I have grown hard to satisfy," he says, "and write very slowly. And I have so much—not fiction—that will be thought of, when I don't want to think of it, that I am forced to take more care than I once took." In other ways, also, did this presentiment of the end prey upon his mind. He was morbidly eager to repair some injustices that he had been heedlessly guilty of in his earlier novels. So he created the benevolent old Jew, Riah, whom he makes the unconscious agent of a rascal, in order to wipe out his reproach against the Jew, Fagin, in *Oliver Twist*, as bringing unfair odium upon the race he belonged to. He was anxious, too, to knit up some of the loose ends of his work in other directions: notably, for the reform of the Poor Laws, and toward a better system of national education. And these self-imposed tasks he did his best to perfect by means of the creation of such a type as Betty Higden; and by his descriptions of the school over which Bradley Headstone presided, and the moral he draws from the evolution of the selfish little prig, Charlie Hexam.

"'The Poor-house?' said the Secretary.

"Mrs. Higden set that resolute old face of hers, and darkly nodded yes.

"'You dislike the mention of it?'

"'Dislike the mention of it?' answered the old woman. 'Kill me sooner than take me there. Throw this pretty child under cart-horses' feet and a loaded waggon, sooner than take him there. Come to us and find us all a-dying, and set a light to us all where we lie, and let us all blaze away into a heap of cinders, sooner than move a corpse of us there! . . . Do I never read in the newspapers—God help me and the like of me!—how the worn-out people that do come down to that, get driven from post to pillar and pillar to post, a-purpose to tire them out. Do I never read how they are put off, put off, put off—how they are grudged, grudged, grudged the shelter, or the doctor, or the drop of physic, or the bit of bread? Do I never read how they grow heartsick of it and give it up, after having let themselves drop so low, and how they after all die out for want of help? Then I say, I hope I can die as well as another, and I'll die without that disgrace. . . . Johnny, my pretty,' continued old Betty, caressing the child . . . 'your old Granny Betty is nigher fourscore year than threescore and ten. She never begged nor had a penny of the Union money in her life. She paid scot and she paid lot when she had money to pay; she worked when she could, and she starved when she must. You pray that your granny may have strength enough left her at the last (she's strong for an old one, Johnny) to get up from her bed and run and hide herself and swown to death in a hole, sooner than fall into the hands of those Cruel Jacks we read of, that dodge and drive, and worry and weary, and scorn and shame, the decent poor.'"

Equipped with a basketful of small wares, Betty Higden fares forth to earn her living by peddling them up and down the country, to fall by the wayside at last:—

"'I am safe here,' was her last benumbed thought. 'When I am found dead at the foot of the Cross, it will be by some of my own sort, some of the working people who work among the lights yonder. I cannot see the lighted windows now, but they are there. I am thankful for all! . . .'

"The darkness gone and a face bending down.

"'It cannot be the boofer lady?'

"'I don't understand what you say. Let me wet your lips again with this brandy. I have been away to fetch it. Did you think I was long gone?'

"It is as the face of a woman, shaded with a quantity of rich dark hair. It is the earnest face of a woman who is young and handsome. But all is over with me on earth, and this must be an Angel.

"'Have I been long dead?'

"'I don't understand what you say. Let me wet your lips again. I hurried all I could, and brought no one back with me, lest you should die of the shock of strangers.'

"'Am I not dead?'

"'I cannot understand what you say. Your voice is so low and broken that I cannot hear you. Do you hear me?'

"'Yes.'

"'Do you mean yes?'

"'Yes.'

"'I was coming from my work just now, along the path outside (I was up with the night-hands last night), and I heard a groan, and found you lying here.'

"'What work, deary?'

"'Did you ask what work? At the paper-mill.'

"'Where is it?'

"'Your face is turned up to the sky, and you cannot see it. It is close by. You can see my face, here, between you and the sky?'

"'Yes.'

" ' Dare I lift you ? '

" ' Not yet.'

" ' Not even lift your head to get it on my arm ? I will do it by very gentle degrees. You shall hardly feel it.'

" ' Not yet. Paper. Letter.'

" ' This paper in your breast ? '

" ' Bless ye ! '

" She reads it with surprise, and looks down with a new expression and an added interest on the motionless face she kneels beside.

" ' I know these names. I have heard them often.'

" ' Will you send it, my dear ? '

" ' I cannot understand you. Let me wet your lips again, and your forehead. There. O, poor thing, poor thing ! ' These words through her fast-dropping tears. ' What was it that you asked me ? Wait till I bring my ear quite close.'

" ' Will you send it, my dear ? '

" ' Will I send it to the writers ? Is that your wish ? Yes, certainly.'

" ' You'll not give it up to anyone but them ? '

" ' No.'

" ' As you must grow old in time and come to your dying hour, my dear, you'll not give it up to anyone but them ? '

" ' No. Most solemnly.'

" ' Nor let the Parish touch me, nor yet so much as look at me ? ' with another struggle.

" ' No. Faithfully.'

" A look of thankfulness and triumph lights the worn old face. The eyes, which have been darkly fixed upon the sky, turned with meaning in them towards the compassionate face from which the tears are dropping, and a smile is on the aged lips as they ask :

" ' What is your name, my dear ? '

" ' My name is Lizzie Hexam.'

"'I must be sore disfigured. Are you afraid to kiss me?'

"The answer is the ready pressure of her lips upon the cold but smiling mouth.

"'Bless ye! Now lift me, my love.'

"Lizzie Hexam very softly raised the weather-stained grey head, and lifted her as high as Heaven."

And the work which Dickens consummated in this exquisite passage, though still some way off from bearing its full harvest, is yet already in the way of producing its ripe fruit ere long. It is only fair to testify, indeed—as the present writer does out of his own intimate knowledge of this matter—that the Betty Higdens of to-day are as considerately treated and as kindly-cared-for in our up-to-date infirmary wards as is possible under the modern regime; and that that possibility does permit of a good deal of rest and comfort and consideration for the worn-out souls and bodies of the defeated ones in life's battle. There is no harshness or humiliation that authority sanctions; and no wilful shirking of responsibilities or burking of humanitarian aims, so far as aged paupers are concerned. Apart from the shame and disgrace of it—which shame and disgrace rests not upon the shoulders of our workhouse inmates, but on those that send them there—there is very little mitigable hardship nowadays in these institutions.

There is some marked improvement, too, in our national system of education since that time. A larger spirit pervades the deliberations of our County Councils than used to animate even the old School Boards. The teaching of Froebel and other scientists who have devoted their talents to the understanding of the child-mind, coupled with the swift uprising of a class of schoolmasters and schoolmistresses who have a practical and sympathetic knowledge and experience of the kind of minds they are appointed to instruct, have done much

to enlighten and smooth the paths of learning for the children of the poor. Some slight regard is paid now to the feeding of their bodies as well as of their minds, some care is taken to safeguard their health as well as their immortal souls, to take some account of individual capacity and individual bent as well as to free them from the evils of dull, brutish ignorance. It is not a great deal; but it is a distinct gain. And the name of Dickens ought to be indissolubly associated with this reform, at least, as it is bound up in the vast improvement that has taken place in the status and the capability and the integrity of our nurses. For it was Dickens who first pointed out the absurdity of a system which left the education of the young in the hands of private adventurers—just as the whole art and science of healing is now, though education has largely passed into the care of the State. How admirably he put the finishing touches to this work may be seen from the following description of the school which young Hexam attended, a school of the type that educational experts of the last generation deemed well-nigh immaculate.

"It was a school for all ages, and for both sexes. The latter were kept apart, and the former were partitioned off into square assortments. But all the place was pervaded by a grimly ludicrous pretence that every pupil was childish and innocent. This pretence, much favoured by the lady-visitors, led to the ghastliest absurdities. Young women old in the vices of the commonest and worst life, were expected to profess themselves enthralled by the good child's book, the adventures of Little Margery who resided in the village cottage by the mill; severely reproved and morally squashed the miller, when she was five and he was fifty; divided her porridge with singing-birds; denied herself a new nankeen bonnet on the ground that the turnips did not wear nankeen bonnets, neither did the sheep who ate

them; who plaited straw and delivered the dreariest orations to all comers, at all sorts of unseasonable times. So, unwieldy young dredgers and hulking mudlarks were referred to the experiences of Thomas Twopence, who, having resolved not to rob (under circumstances of uncommon atrocity) his particular friend and benefactor, of eighteenpence, presently came into supernatural possession of three and sixpence, and lived a shining light ever afterwards. (Note: the benefactor came to no good.) Several swaggering sinners had written their own biographies in the same strain, it always appearing from the lessons of those very boastful persons, that you were to do good, not because it *was* good, but because you were to make a good thing of it. Contrariwise, the adult pupils were taught to read (if they could learn) out of the New Testament; and by dint of stumbling over the syllables and keeping their bewildered eyes on the particular syllables coming round to their turn, were as absolutely ignorant of the sublime history, as if they had never seen or heard of it. An exceedingly and confoundingly perplexing jumble of a school, in fact, where black spirits and grey, red spirits and white, jumbled, jumbled, jumbled, jumbled, jumbled every night. And particularly every Sunday night. For then, an inclined plane of unfortunate infants would be handed over to the prosiest and worst of all the teachers with good intentions, whom nobody would endure. Who, taking his stand on the floor before them as chief executioner, would be attended by a conventional volunteer boy as executioner's assistant. When and where it first became the conventional system that a weary or inattentive infant in a class must have its face smoothed downward with a hot hand, or when and where the first conventional volunteer boy first beheld such system in operation, and became inflamed with a sacred zeal to administer it, matters not. It was the function of the chief executioner to

hold forth, and it was the function of the acolyte to dart at sleeping infants, yawning infants, restless infants, whimpering infants, and smooth their wretched faces; sometimes with one hand, as if he were anointing them for a whisker; sometimes with both hands, applied after the fashion of blinkers. And so the jumble would be in action in this department, for a mortal hour, the exponent drawling on My Dearerr Childerrennerr, let us say, for example, about the beautiful coming to the Sepulchre; and repeating the word Sepulchre (commonly used among infants) five hundred times, and never once hinting what it meant; the conventional boy smoothing away right and left, as an infallible commentary; the whole hot-bed of flushed and exhausted infants exchanging measles, rashes, whooping-cough, fever, and stomach disorders, as if they were assembled in High Market for the purpose."

Now I do not know how Dickens became acquainted with the constituents of that picture; but I can vouch for its absolute accuracy, out of my own experience of a church school, down to its last detail of the conventional boy.

Obviously, the results of such a system, except in rare and exceptional cases, could hardly be expected to be happy or propitious; nor could the part it played in the formation of any child's normal character be in any sense satisfactory, as it was not—and Dickens plainly shows why it was not, in spite of the advantages enjoyed by the particular example cited—in the case of young Charlie Hexam, though he might be pointed out to admirers of the system as bright, monumental evidence of its entire success.

III

But *Our Mutual Friend* is so crammed—not to say overloaded—with deadly earnest purpose, as if the author would have omitted nothing that he could

possibly comprehend in one last wide survey, that the task of selection from such a mass of pertinent material becomes a highly invidious one. But no review of Dickens's work, such as this aspires to be, could leave out some consideration of the cult of Podsnappery as it is here exposed and laid naked on the satirist's dissecting-table.

"Mr. Podsnap was well-to-do, and stood very high in Mr. Podsnap's opinion. Beginning with a good inheritance, he had married a good inheritance and had thrived exceedingly in the Marine Insurance way, and was quite satisfied. He never could make out why everybody was not quite satisfied, and he felt conscious that he set a brilliant social example by being particularly well satisfied with most things, and above all other things with himself.

"Thus happily acquainted with his own merit and importance, Mr. Podsnap settled that whatever he put behind him he put out of existence. There was a dignified conclusiveness—not to add, a grand convenience—in this way of getting rid of disagreeables, which had done much towards establishing Mr. Podsnap in his lofty place in Mr. Podsnap's satisfaction. 'I don't want to know about it; I don't choose to discuss it; I don't admit it.' Mr. Podsnap had even acquired a peculiar flourish of his right arm in often clearing the world of its most difficult problems, by sweeping them behind him (and consequently sheer away) with those words and a flushed face. For they affronted him.

"Mr. Podsnap's world was not a very large world, morally; no, nor even geographically; seeing that although his business was sustained upon commerce with other countries, he considered other countries, with that important reservation, a mistake, and of their manners and customs would conclusively observe, 'Not English!' when, Presto! with a flourish of the arm,

and a flush of the face, they were swept away. Elsewhere, the world got up at eight, shaved close at a quarter-past, breakfasted at nine, went to the City at ten, came home at half-past five, and dined at seven. Mr. Podsnap's notions of the Arts in their integrity might have been stated thus. Literature: large print, respectively descriptive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Painting and Sculpture: models and portraits representing Professors of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Music: a respectable performance (without variations) on stringed and wind instruments, sedately expressive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Nothing else to be permitted to those same vagrants, the Arts, on pain of excommunication. Nothing else To Be—anywhere!

"As a so eminently respectable man, Mr. Podsnap was sensible of its being required of him to take Providence under his protection. Consequently he always knew exactly what Providence meant. Inferior and less respectable men might fall short of that mark, but Mr. Podsnap was always up to it. And it was very remarkable (and must have been very comfortable) that what Providence meant was invariably what Mr. Podsnap meant. . . .

"It was a trait in Mr. Podsnap's character (and in one form or other it will be generally seen to pervade the depths and shallows of Podsnappery) that he could not endure a hint of disparagement of any friend or acquaintance of his. 'How dare you?' he would seem to say, in such a case. 'What do you mean? I have licensed this person. This person has taken out *my*

certificate. Through this person you strike at me, Podsnap the Great. And it is not that I particularly care for the person's dignity, but that I do most particularly care for Podsnap's.' "

The Podsnaps, the Veneerings, Boots and Brewer and the Buffers, that harmless little man Twemlow, Lady Tippins, the Lammles, all belong to the same gallery of portraits—or, if you prefer it, caricatures. We have all met with such representative types in the houses of the snobocracy : a little more subdued in colour, maybe, a little softened in tone, a little reduced in scale to fit in more easily with the scheme of polite society, but all unmistakably recognizable as indubitably belonging to the species. They are not exactly gentlefolk, perhaps ; but then this subtle attribute of gentlehood would seem to be of such an amorphous and nebulous quality, and of such an elusive nature, that it is capable of throwing its aura around so many undistinguished and stupid and commonplace—if not actually offensive—personalities. Would the languid Eugene Wrayburn, for instance, weary hanger-on of this precious circle, be deemed a gentleman by his familiars if he made an appearance in a modern drawing-room ? One rather fancies that he would. In his intercourse with the plebeian schoolmaster, Bradley Headstone—whose drab respectability cloaked so much scarlet passion—he shows a sufficient lack of delicacy and consideration and even of common humanity, and exhibits enough of callous cruelty and downright heartlessness and insensibility, nicely graded and pointed to irritate and inflame, to warrant the assumption, any way. Here is an epitome of the first triangular interview between himself and the schoolmaster and the schoolboy, Charlie Hexam :—

" Passing him with his eyes as if there were nothing where he stood, Eugene looked on to Bradley Headstone. With consummate indolence he turned to

Mortimer (his friend, also present), enquiring: 'And who may this other person be?'

"'I am Charles Hexam's friend,' said Bradley. 'I am Charles Hexam's schoolmaster.'

"'My good sir, you should teach your pupils better manners,' returned Eugene.

"Composedly smoking, he leaned an elbow on the chimneypiece, at the side of the fire, and looked at the schoolmaster. It was a cruel look, in its cold disdain of him, as a creature of no worth. The schoolmaster looked at him, and that too was a cruel look, though of the different kind, that it had a raging jealousy and fiery wrath in it. . . .

"'In some high respects, Mr. Eugene Wrayburn,' said Bradley, answering him with pale and quivering lips, 'the natural feelings of my pupils are stronger than my teaching.'

"'In most respects, I daresay,' replied Eugene, enjoying his cigar, 'though whether high or low is of no importance. You have my name very correctly. Pray what is yours?'

"'It cannot concern you much to know, but——'

"'True,' interposed Eugene, striking sharply and cutting him short at his mistake, 'it does not concern me at all to know. I can say schoolmaster, which is a most respectable title. You are right, Schoolmaster.'

"It was not the dullest part of this goad in its galling of Bradley Headstone that he had made it himself in a moment of incautious anger. He tried to set his lips so as to prevent their quivering, but they quivered fast.

"'Mr. Eugene Wrayburn,' said the boy, 'I want a word with you. I have wanted it so much that we have looked out your address in the book, and we have been to your office, and we have come from your office here.'

"'You have given yourself much trouble, School-

master,' observed Eugene, blowing the feathery ash from his cigar. 'I hope it may prove remunerative. . . . Was this worth while, Schoolmaster? . . . So much trouble for nothing? You should know best, but I think not.'

"'I don't know, Mr. Wrayburn,' answered Bradley, with his passion rising, 'why you address me——'

"'Don't you?' said Eugene. 'Then I won't.'

"He said it so tauntingly in his perfect placidity, that the respectable right hand clutching the respectable hair-guard of the respectable watch could have wound it round his throat and strangled him with it. Not another word did Eugene deem it worth while to utter, but stood leaning his head upon his hand, smoking and looking imperturbably at the chafing Bradley Headstone with his clutching right hand, until Bradley was well-nigh mad."

The boy delivers an egregious speech of some length, in which he deprecates Wrayburn's efforts toward improving his sister Lizzie's education, and objects to them as being inspired by a most sinister and dishonourable motive, as they are.

"A pause ensued, in which the Schoolmaster looked very awkward.

"'May I suggest, Schoolmaster,' said Eugene, removing his fast-waning cigar from his lips to glance at it, 'that you can now take your pupil away?'

"'And Mr. Lightwood,' added the boy, with a burning face, under the flaming aggravation of getting no sort of answer or attention, 'I hope you'll take notice of what I have said to your friend, and of what your friend has heard me say, word by word, whatever he pretends to the contrary. You are bound to take notice of it, Mr. Lightwood, for, as I have already mentioned, you first brought your friend into my sister's company, and but for you we should never have seen him. Lord knows none of us ever wanted him, any more than any of us

will ever miss him. Now Mr. Headstone, as Mr. Eugene Wrayburn has been obliged to hear what I had to say, and couldn't help himself, and as I have said it out to the last word, and we have done all that we wanted to, we may go.'

"'Go downstairs and leave me a moment, Hexam,' he returned. The boy complying with an indignant look and as much noise as he could make, swung out of the room. . . .

"'You think me of no more value than the dirt under your feet,' said Bradley to Eugene, speaking in a carefully weighed and measured tone, or he could not have spoken at all.

"'I assure you, Schoolmaster,' replied Eugene, 'I don't think about you.'

"'That's not true,' returned the other; 'you know better.'

"'That's coarse,' Eugene retorted; 'but you don't know better.'

"'Mr. Wrayburn, at least I know very well that it would be idle to set myself against you in insolent words or overbearing manners. That lad who has just gone out could put you to shame in half-a-dozen branches of knowledge in half-an-hour, but you can throw him aside like an inferior. You can do as much by me, I have no doubt, beforehand.'

"'Possibly,' remarked Eugene.

"'But I am more than a lad,' said Bradley, with his clutching hand, 'and I will be heard, sir.'

"'As a schoolmaster,' said Eugene, 'you are always being heard. That ought to content you.'

"'But it does not content me,' replied the other, white with passion. 'Do you suppose that a man, in forming himself for the duties I discharge, and in watching and repressing himself daily to discharge them well, dismisses a man's nature?'

"'I suppose you,' said Eugene, 'judging from what

I see when I look at you, to be rather too passionate for a good schoolmaster.' As he spoke, he tossed away the end of his cigar.

"'Passionate with you, sir, I admit I am. Passionate with you, sir, I respect myself for being. But I have not Devils for my pupils.'

"'For your Teachers, I should rather say,' replied Eugene.

"'Mr. Wrayburn.'

"'Schoolmaster.'

"'Sir, my name is Bradley Headstone.'

"'As you justly said, my good sir, your name cannot concern me. Now, what more?'

"'This more. Oh, what a misfortune is mine,' cried Bradley, breaking off to wipe the starting perspiration from his face as he shook from head to foot, 'that I cannot so control myself as to appear a stronger creature than this, when a man who has not felt in all his life what I have felt in a day can so command himself!' He said it in a very agony, and even followed it with an errant motion of his hands, as if he could have torn himself.

"'Mr. Wrayburn, I desire to say something to you on my own part.'

"'Come, come, Schoolmaster,' returned Eugene, with a languid approach to impatience as the other again struggled with himself, 'say what you have to say. And let me remind you that the door is standing open and your young friend waiting for you on the stairs.'

"'When I accompanied that youth here, sir, I did so with the purpose of adding, as a man whom you should not be permitted to put aside, in case you put him aside as a boy, that his instinct is correct and right.' Thus Bradley Headstone, with great effort and difficulty.

"'Is that all?' asked Eugene.

"'No, sir,' said the other, flushed and fierce. 'I

strongly support him in his disapproval of your visits to his sister, and in his objection to your officiousness—and worse—in what you have taken upon yourself to do for her.'

"'Is *that* all?' asked Eugene.

"'No, sir. I determined to tell you that you are not justified in these proceedings, and that they are injurious to his sister.'

"'Are you her schoolmaster as well as her brother's? Or perhaps you would like to be?' said Eugene.

"It was a stab that the blood followed, in its rush to Bradley Headstone's face, as swiftly as if it had been dealt with a dagger. 'What do you mean by that?' was as much as he could utter.

"'A natural ambition enough,' said Eugene, coolly. 'Far be from me to say otherwise. The sister — who is something too much upon your lips, perhaps—is so very different from all the associations to which she has been used, and from all the low obscure people about her, that it is a very natural ambition.'

"'Do you throw my obscurity in my teeth, Mr. Wrayburn?'

"'That can hardly be, for I know nothing concerning it, Schoolmaster, and seek to know nothing.'

"'You reproach me with my origin,' said Bradley Headstone; 'you cast insinuations at my bringing-up. But I tell you, sir, I have worked my way onward, out of both and in spite of both, and have a right to be considered a better man than you, with better reasons for being proud.'

"'How can I reproach you with what is not within my knowledge, or how can I cast stones that were never in my hand, is a problem for the ingenuity of a schoolmaster to prove,' returned Eugene. 'Is *that* all?'

"'No, sir. If you suppose that boy——'

"'Who really will be tired of waiting,' said Eugene, politely.

"'If you suppose that boy to be friendless, Mr. Wrayburn, you deceive yourself. I am his friend, and you shall find me so.'

"'And you will find *him* on the stairs,' remarked Eugene.

"'You may have promised yourself, sir, that you could do what you choose here, because you had to deal with a mere boy, inexperienced, friendless, and unassisted. But I give you warning that this mean calculation is wrong. You have to do with a man also. You have to do with me. I will support him, and if need be require reparation for him. My hand and heart are in his cause, and are open to him.'

"'And—quite a coincidence—the door is open,' remarked Eugene.

"'I scorn your silly evasions, and I scorn you,' said the schoolmaster. 'In the meanness of your nature you revile me with the meanness of my birth. I hold you in contempt for it. If you don't profit by this visit, and act accordingly, you will find me as bitterly in earnest against you as I could be if I deemed you worth a second thought on my own account.'

"With a consciously bad grace and stiff manner, as Wrayburn looked so easily and calmly on, he went out with these words, and the heavy door closed like a furnace door upon his red and white heats of rage.

"'A curious monomaniac," said Eugene. 'The man seems to believe that everybody was acquainted with his mother!'"

O, surely Eugene Wrayburn was a real gentleman!

But here I perceive I am at close grips with that stale old botheration which has caused the criticasters to rage so furiously together ever since Thackeray showed us what a gentleman ought, and Dickens showed us what he ought not, to be. This issue can no longer be evaded, obviously. Let the Wilfers and the Boffins go, then; let Silas Wegg and Mr. Venus; Gaffer

Hexam, Rogue Riderhood and Miss Abbey Potterson; Fascination Fledgeby; Jenny Wren and Sloppy and the rest, be dismissed in silence like absentees from a roll-call. The question of the Gentleman and Dickens cries out for settlement, and will not consent to be disregarded.

PART III

SOCIALIST

CHAPTER I

CLASS PREJUDICE

I

THIRTEEN years ago it was my privilege to read a paper on Charles Dickens to the members of a working men's institute in Kentish Town, London, in the course of which I delivered myself of some rather dogmatic pronouncements. But though I am an unlucky thirteen long years older now, I find that I have very little to add to, or withdraw from, the substance of what I said then, however much I may deprecate the form and tone in which those utterances were made, or am inwardly amused by their youthful insouciant crudity.

I said, among other things, that Thackeray's Gentleman, after all, is merely a Gentleman's idea of a Gentleman. Dickens's Gentleman is the poor man's idea of a Gentleman. They are both valuable, both worth having. . . . Thackeray had the advantage of being perfectly familiar with Gentlemen from his cradle. Dickens had the advantage of *not* being so familiar with them. Thackeray saw them with old, accustomed eyes; Dickens saw them with new, unaccustomed eyes. . . . Let us take two Gentlemen—one from Thackeray, one from Dickens—and set them side by side and consider them. We may find out something. First, there is Major Pendennis, Thackeray's Gentleman. I am told by those who consider themselves very blue-blooded indeed that Major Pendennis is all right—a Gentleman. Well, perhaps he was not altogether a bad old chap—

though a beast of a snob. And he is quite alive. But the curious thing is that Thackeray does not, for a moment, allow the Major to look ridiculous. If Dickens had drawn Major Pendennis, he would have made him a very absurd figure indeed. If any of you (it was, as I say, an audience of working men) met Major Pendennis you would probably think him rather an old fool. Dickens certainly would have thought him an old fool, and written him down like that, because Dickens had the advantage of surveying him from an impartial standpoint. Thackeray had not that advantage. Thackeray had all the prejudices of his class. Thackeray was a Gentleman—by training, environment, and heredity. So was Major Pendennis. "You are one of us, Major," said Thackeray, in effect. "And we are *not* ridiculous!" And all the other Gentlemen applauded; and Thackeray was established as one who could draw Gentlemen, whilst Dickens was put down as one who could not.

Thus spake I.

The Gentleman I selected from Dickens was Sir Leicester Dedlock.

And I still hold, more or less, the same opinions on this subject that I expressed thirteen years ago.

To speak plainly, I have really no use for that word, Gentleman. It affronts me. It smacks of all manner of abominations. It suggests all sorts of sets of opinions, and points of view and mental attitudes that irritate and sicken me where they do not make me laugh. The servant-girl never walks out with her Lover, you know; he is always her Young Gentleman. The clerk never kisses his Sweetheart or quarrels with her; it is always his Young Lady that he talks so much about. The middle classes boggle at the word Gentleman, and hesitate a good deal about applying it; the upper classes never use it at all in any connection, except it be humorously or disparagingly. . . . But all this

must be so entirely in accord with the sentiments and experiences of the elect among my readers that I need say no more, perhaps. One feels, indeed, that one is under some constraint to make apology for using the word Gentleman at any time, in decent company. And I should certainly refrain from using it here, or troubling myself about its precise meaning, if I followed my own inclinations, and were not uneasily conscious of a responsibility to tackle this silly botheration, willy-nilly, at some stage or other of this present enterprise. Because, it ought to be established that Dickens was quite as right about the Gentleman as anyone can hope to be. As the Dictionary is, for instance, when it defines the word as "a man of good birth; every man above the rank of yeoman, comprehending noblemen; a man who, without a title, bears a coat of arms; or whose ancestors have been freemen; a man of good breeding and politeness, as distinguished from the vulgar and clownish; a man in a position of life above a tradesman or a mechanic; a term of complaisance." And Dickens was distinctly nearer the bull's-eye, as a rule, than Thackeray is when he answers his own question, "What is it to be a gentleman?" in this wise: "Is it to have lofty aims, to lead a pure life, to keep your honour virgin; to have the esteem of your fellow-citizens, and the love of your fireside; to bear good fortune meekly; to suffer evil with constancy; and through evil or good to maintain truth always? Show me the man whose life exhibits these qualities, and him we will salute as gentleman, whatever his rank may be. . . ."

All of which is the merest poppycock, of course. For such a description might fit, quite appropriately, a bargee or a costermonger. And Thackeray was not at all the kind of person to accept, even as an equal, any human male of that type. Neither are we, nor is anyone, thinking of that particular type of excellent

creature, Nature's gentleman, when we debate this issue. We are thinking rather of the being who is mainly and essentially an affair of clothes and accent, deportment and manners: what we call a well-bred man. And we do not necessarily mean a man who carries his refinements of speech and person into other stations of life than that he was born in. For our present purpose, that man will do who is a gentleman in a West End drawing-room and a hooligan in a West End music-hall on Boat-race night; or who, when he is stirred up (as over the recent Brown Dog of Battersea agitation), attends women's meetings and throws bad eggs about, and explodes malodorous gases, and waves filthy, stinking fish in the air, and adjures the lady speakers to go home and change their underwear, and altogether conducts himself in a fashion that would infallibly equip him with a thick ear in the Bethnal Green Road. *A propos*, I recall an incident in which figured a gentleman . . . a courtly, distinguished diplomatist and man of learning, with the rank of Marquis, and a world-wide reputation for pure, high-minded chivalry and the nicest refinement; a man who was held up publicly as a supreme example of the finished aristocratic article, and who, there is no possibility of doubt, lived up to his reputation—in his own circle.

The occasion was a Lord Mayor's Show Day. The Marquis had somehow got cut off from his retinue and the procession, and was forced to walk in his Court dress down Cheapside, guarded on either hand by a constable. The crowd was dense and boisterous and inquisitive. A fishmonger offered the Marquis the shelter of his shop whilst someone went and fetched a cab. The Marquis accepted the offer, and sat down in the midst of the fishmonger's friends and relatives, most of them women. To one of these women—a young and pretty girl—the Marquis addressed himself, smiling and suave, and she responded, shyly. They

talked for a few moments, and then, in reply to some innocent commonplace remark from her, he uttered a jest of such a kind, and expressed in such terms, that it caused a hot blush to dye her face scarlet from the roots of her hair to her neck, and almost made her weep for shame and mortification. The Marquis laughed and chucked her under the chin. Her face turned white as milk in her distress. Still he beamed, bland and self-satisfied. And I saw that he did not yet understand; that, regarding her as a person of a lower class, he supposed her to have no delicacy such as he would have respected in a lady of his own class. I heard what he said; and I was hot with indignation. But he remained throughout utterly unconscious of having given the girl any cause of offence. He thought, I am sure, that he had paid her the only sort of compliment that such a woman was capable of understanding and appreciating. And he only did and said, he only surmised and felt, as almost any Gentleman of similar high rank and dainty breeding and gracious traditions would have done.

Now, this incident may seem trivial, inconclusive, unconvincing, as it is here set down. But actually it crystallized for me the whole meaning of the German-made phrase, "The Class War," and made an indelible impression on my memory that will always serve to explain the deep-rooted antagonism which exists between the aristocrat and the proletarian, the Haves and Have Nots. It is an antagonism born of complete misunderstanding, and fostered by prejudice and manured by ignorance. The Gentleman thinks that the Cad is only one remove from the Brute. He may say otherwise; he may maintain stoutly that he thinks nothing of the sort; he may even think that he thinks otherwise than as he does; but deep down in his heart, ingrained in his being, is that feeling of immeasurable superiority to the people of the lower classes from

which he can never free himself, even after years of close association with them. Whereas the truth is, that the lower you go in the social scale, down to a certain point, the greater will be the innate consideration shown by one to another, and the finer will the instincts of tact and good feeling be. Indeed, the poor are hedged about, in every detail of their daily lives, with innumerable immutable conventions all having their end in the safeguarding of one another's tenderest sensibilities from shock or hurt. There are all sorts of topics that they never mention. There are all sorts of subjects that are as rigidly taboo in the home circle as the name of Oliver Cromwell at the Royal table. They do not mince their words, because they have no need: they leave such words out altogether.

The poor are hide-bound by the rules of an involved and elaborate etiquette, beside which the simple, easy usages of polite society are comparatively negligible. There are all sorts of fetishes to which you must bow down on certain occasions and in certain special circumstances. And if you are from the upper world you are no more to be excused for your ignorance of these intricate observances than the parvenu is to be excused for his ignorance of the various uses of a multiplicity of knives and forks. It is painfully easy for the aristocrat to wound an infinity of tender susceptibilities in a bewildering variety of ways so soon as ever he associates with the plebeian. But there are so many current misconceptions concerning this matter that the truth is hard to realize. Always on the stage and very often in novels, the poor are represented as eating and drinking and comporting themselves generally in the most gross manner imaginable. In Robertson's *Caste*, I remember, Polly Eccles offers Captain Hawtree a sausage on a fork, or does something—and many other things—of that kind; and the audience is quite satisfied that this is quite as it would be. Where-

as, in reality, Captain Hawtree would have been embarrassed, not by the free-and-easy manners of his hosts, but by their stiff formality and awkward ceremonialism. He would have been greeted, not with a cheerful reckless disregard of appearances, but by a succession of civilities almost as elaborate, and as hard to master, as some ritual of High Mass.

The point need not be further laboured, however. It is sufficient to give some indications of the differences, not so much between the respective manners and customs of the poor and the rich, as of the totally false notions which prevail in regard to them.

Thus, when Thackeray in his essay on George the Fourth penned that insincere nonsense about a Gentleman necessarily having lofty aims and so forth, he was merely tickling the ears of the groundlings; and was no more expressing his real convictions as to what constitutes the conventional Gentleman than the Parliamentary candidate is when he describes his electors as independent and enlightened citizens. I repeat that when we speak of a gentleman we have in our minds a being essentially made up of clothes and deportment, speech and manners. And this particular type never has been rendered with any approach to true realism by any author with whose work I am acquainted.

To begin, the Gentleman must have a cultivated and unnatural accent. He must speak very indistinctly and with a slovenly pronunciation, giving false values to his vowels and consonants, and especially to his "a's" and "r's." Yet he is always represented in books as speaking English with a most admirable discretion and exactitude: as only an educated Celt—a Welshman or an Irishman—ever does speak it. The Cockney is ruthlessly shorn of his "h's" and his "g's"—in books—and his speech is otherwise rendered in faithful phonetics to convey the impression of a weirdly inaccurate pronunciation; though it is demonstrable that the

Cockney accent is not a whit more inaccurate than the University accent; and that the West End speaks with about the same disregard of the mother-tongue as the East End. Mr. H. G. Wells is the only author with whom I am acquainted who seems to realize this. His public-school men talk of "i'on bahs," meaning "iron bars," and his board-school man says, "That's jest it" —in each case transgressing the laws of pronunciation in an equal degree. But the rest of the novelists observe the old convention still, as they have always observed it.

And this convention finds other reflexes in many much deeper and murkier puddles.

Until within the last fifty years literature was supposed to be produced only by gentlemen—always using the word in its accepted sense. Which is to say that it was produced by men educated in an old-fashioned, stately, leisurely way—the way ordained of immemorial tradition by the breed of the Oxford don. Or, if not so educated, by men aping and subscribing to the conventions of that cult. Such exceptions to this universal rule as Burns wrote purely in the vernacular when they departed from that convention. Thus false canons of criticism were evolved which extended not merely to literary technique, but to the literary presentment of life itself. And out of these false canons arose a false standard of manners that set up the manners of the Upper Classes as the final example of what good manners should be. The phrases Good Form and Bad Form were struck: Good Form being that conduct of life which best accorded with the ideas of the Oxford undergraduate; and any divagation from their arbitrary rules for the social guidance of the many-headed being adjudged Bad Form. Superimposed upon this silly convention was an edifice of cant compiled from the ancient moralists and others which affected to confer a brevet-rank of gentlehood on all who were merely good

and great, in spite of their humble birth, whilst it still reserved its patent of true nobility for the unimpeachable blue-blooded only, whatever their vices or weaknesses or pettinesses might be. And it was from this arrogant verdict, delivered without any authority or right of jurisdiction, and based on no solid foundation, either of justice or expediency, that Dickens—vehemently, if only tacitly—demurred; and against which he entered caveat after caveat in the form of novels.

II

It is to Dickens's eternal credit that he was never false to his class: his class being, of course, the respectable, self-respecting poor. There never lived a man more keenly aware of the absurdities and the shortcomings, the frailties and the pettinesses and the stupidities of that class; there never was a man with a happier knack of extracting their human essence and mixing it with his ink to make his words live. Strain away as much as you like of exaggeration and caricature (if you are inflexibly persuaded of the existence of those faults in his work) and there still remains a residue of solid, cold truth that will bear the strictest analysis. There still remains a whole world, with its atmosphere of shabby-gentility inimitably rendered, in which a vast crowd of speaking figures move and have their credible being. You may question their absolute authenticity, but you cannot deny their reality. A sea of tears has moistened the pages in which are set forth the sorrows and misfortunes of these living, breathing figments; for of Dickens it might daringly be said with greater truth than of Keats that here is one whose name was writ in water; the world has shaken its sides over the imaginary humours of that host of droll phantoms, those cohorts of a whimsical fancy. Their mere names have enriched the language with a list of handy

synonyms for broadly representative types that we should find it hard to do without, nowadays. For Dickens had a unique talent in the devising of names: one of the rarest in the average novelist's bag, by the way. Dickens, in short, knew the class—his own class—that he wrote about, as no other writer, before or since, has; and he pictured it faithfully, according to the light of his temperament.

I do not think that he knew the people of the abyss so well. He usually elects to consider his lowest types of all from the objective rather than the subjective point of view; and that is also his method in dealing with the well-to-do class. But with the decent, seemly, struggling class he is in full and perfect sympathy; and his sympathy never faltered or wavered. From the beginning to the end of his labours he was staunch to them. He never adopted any least air or faintest tone of condescension or cynicism when he wrote of them; but simply and directly wrote them down as he saw and understood and loved them. In this he stood alone. It would be almost true to say that he stands alone still. For it is the abiding curse of those who emerge from the ruck to discredit and disparage their origin by vain pretences, by a mean assumption of superiority to their aforetime congeners. The son of the tradesman quotes with approval the French view that we are a nation of tradesmen. The daughter of the Philistines has never heard of Gath. The plebeian of yesterday, whose lurid past lies buried in a pauper's grave, prates of the lower orders as if they were of a different flesh and blood in his eagerness to hide the grisly fact that he belonged to them before he bartered his honour for a ribbon to stick in his coat. The scribes of the Press who belittle the bone and brain of the race, and the Pharisees who stand with the self-righteous in the portico of the temple of Mammon and for a pretence make long prayers: these—how many of them!—cloak the shining spirit

of their success in robes of a dubious whiteness, as if it were the body of their defeat. They are all ashamed of the class from which they sprang. And in their ignoble rage to do it every disservice in their power, are all agog, not to let the dead past bury its dead, but to force the living past to bury its living. They are traitors to their order, where Dickens aspired to be a saviour.

In his biography one reads how he moved as an equal in the society of royalties and princes, dukes and earls and all the rest of them ; how the greatest and the wisest and the noblest men and women of his time were proud to claim him as their friend. But one never reads that he forswore or was in any way false to his natural inbred sympathies ; or that he tried to seem other than he was ; or to conceal the manner of his upbringing. Nor was he prone to that other extreme of snobbery which impels the self-made man to insist unduly and unseasonably on his former obscurity in order that the splendour of his present state may be the more enhanced and magnified.

Dickens had enemies. He cut a big figure and cast a big shadow that darkened many and left them in the cold. Thus one happens, here and there, upon spiteful allusions to his arrogance, his self-sufficiency, his vanity, and so on. One ponders these imputations, and questing after the whole truth, seeks to find some substantiation, some confirmation, of them. To find none. I declare that I have studied Dickens's life, as it is mirrored in the records of his contemporaries, from every available angle, and I have found no jot or tittle of tangible proof anywhere of any such blood-guiltiness in him that will for a moment withstand the mass of evidence to the contrary effect. And really it would not greatly matter if these accusations were true. The mortal part of Charles Dickens was the least part of him. His work endures. And nowhere shall you find

in all its bulk one ill-natured taunt or gibe aimed at the poor. Dickens pities them, sorrows over them, very occasionally he admonishes them; but he never reviles them. He is never for the prosecution, but always for the defence, when Poverty is arraigned at the bar of justice.

He was, then, deeply imbued with the class feeling. He invariably expressed himself in terms almost of passion when the poor were condemned in faults for which, as he knew, the rich were ultimately responsible. As his fame advanced and as he attained to an ever loftier social altitude he grew more and more earnest in his championship of the poor. He grew more and more fearless and outspoken in his espousal of their cause—which he refused to believe could ever be a lost cause. No glitter of social prestige could dazzle his eyes or blur his vision. As he became more and more intimate with the privileged and leisured classes so his scorn and contempt for them increased. He lived to see the beginnings of that swift uprising of the great capitalist class, which was to displace the landed gentry, and which now forms the main body of the enemy that Socialism has to fight before it can hope to convert. And he foresaw the ruin that this frenzied outbreak of frantic finance and reckless speculation had the power to wreak. He had an equally keen eye for the foibles of the aristocratic types of his day: the gilded lordlings and the rest of the languid triflers who condescend for a handsome salary and a lifelong pension, to mismanage the affairs of our country for us. He left the snobs to Thackeray; he was after bigger game. How he brought it down has been shown, over and over again, in the second part of this book.

But it must be conceded, in common fairness, that Dickens's intense sympathy with the poor and helpless did tend to bias his judgment against the rich and mighty. He was so inflamed by his feeling of resent-

ment against the confiscation by one small class of all power, all wealth, and all the means of joy in life, whilst the rest of the race toiled and sweltered and agonized, from the cradle to the grave, for the bare wherewithal to prolong a life hardly worth living, that he could not, in his righteous anger, always be just and impartial.

Thus, with only a few inconsiderable exceptions, all his gentlefolk are either held up to our opprobrium or our ridicule. Even Sir Leicester Dedlock, who might almost be counted among the exceptions, is shown to be inordinately stupid and self-complacent. Toward every other character of this type, Dickens adopts either the attitude of the angry demagogue with a fine fund of perfervid rhetoric and sardonic denunciation at his command, or that of the clear-sighted, level-headed son of toil for whom the superficial idiosyncrasies of such denizens of the fashionable world as he catches passing glimpses of, in public places, or sees burlesqued for his entertainment in the theatres or the music-halls, possess an irresistible appeal of humour. Mr. Toots and Mr. Sparkler belong to this category : both of them speechless, idea-less asses, but not devoid altogether of some decent instincts. Indeed, though Edmund Sparkler is the merest of nincompoops, Mr. Toots, on the other hand, is quite delightfully good-natured in spite of his stupendous silliness—which prompts the reflection that Dickens only allows any symptoms of good-nature either to such egregious imbeciles as the two specimens cited, or to such specimens as little Mr. Twemlow, who is feebleness and insipidity personified.

But then these people do seem inexpressibly funny to the man who has some comprehensive acquaintance with many grades of society. The lisping clipped speech, the flat, toneless, heady voices, the pretty-pretty airs and graces, the vacuous countenances, the elaborate toilets and sleek immaculate hair copiously anointed and plastered down to the scalp, the general appear-

ance of colourlessness and helplessness and innocence that characterize our gilded youth of the big bony-nosed and chinless genus or the small-featured, square-jawed variety, do tickle the risibilities of the man who has known what it is to work in the sweat of his brow for a bare livelihood. These creatures present nothing more formidable to the quizzical gaze of these disrespectful dogs than a comic spectacle of hilarious possibilities that they find a difficulty in taking at all seriously. They can hardly regard them as being fellow-men; but rather as beings of another order altogether; fragile, dainty, semi-human futilities, the Eloi of the race, toward whom they—the toilers—stand in the relation of Morlocks. To their eyes they seem as something between a man and a woman. The working-man cannot quite credit that they are really responsible and reasonable; that they have passions and emotions, thoughts and dreams, desires and appetites, like himself. They are toy people—a species of grotesque fairy. He bids them run away and play and not bother him. He has his work to do, his business to attend to—said work and business being mainly the providing of new playthings for this same effete race of cosseted and petted grown-up children.

And in his more genial moods Dickens shared that view; a vulgar view, a foolishly, criminally indulgent and short-sighted view . . . that quickly changes to one of stern reproach when he finds these cumberers of the earth tripping up the marching feet of progress, blocking up every new avenue of escape from an intolerable under-world as soon as it is opened up; gambolling and frisking about in a heedless, senseless pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification over the mangled corpses and distorted bodies of their worn-out and broken-down slaves. Then he is smitten with a bitter sense of the preposterous tragedy of a state of things which permits these gaudy unhealthy parasites to

batten and fatten on the real pith and fibre of the nation; that sanctifies an order in which all the rewards go to the spectators—most of them too bored to take any interest in the race—whilst the actual competitors fall exhausted in their tracks and die, and are swept up and carted away and shoved under the ground to sow in corruption the seeds of a fresh crop of like follies that shall bourgeon forth in fresh flowers and fruits for the parasites to regale and deck themselves out withal. Then he is moved to make his vehement protest, to utter his passionate outcries against such a farcical partition of the spoils, which allots all the wealth and beauty of the world to those who have no part in its creation, and all the evil to those who create all that is good. Maybe, as his wrath rises, he becomes a little indiscriminate and confounds ignorance with wanton ill-will. He is blinded a little perhaps by the hot mists of his indignation, so that he cannot see to deal out his blows with an altogether wise discretion. He is only concerned to hit hard and often and as shrewdly and effectively as he knows how. To show no mercy to any who come between him and the mark he has set himself. To tear his enemy in pieces, wheresoever he might chance to find him, and fling his bleeding carcase piecemeal to the ravens.

One seems to see Dickens, spent and gasping in the intervals between these paroxysms, pulling himself together, reconsidering himself, gazing about at the devastation he has wrought—not without a grim pride in his prowess, but still with a doubt lurking at the back of his head that perhaps he has sacrificed something of his dignity in the wild conflict and even wasted some superfluous energy in slaying the slain; finally getting himself in hand again, and telling himself that he must fight more warily, more circumspectly, that he must not ruin his cause by his intemperate conduct of it; that here and there, at least, there may be found one

among his enemies not altogether base or contemptible. And then, in this chastened mood, one seems to see him making a few grudging admissions, advancing some faltering excuses . . . until the ranks of his adversaries begin to close in upon him once more and he sees how the widely arrayed phalanxes seem to fill the whole horizon, shutting out the light, and how hard it must be to snatch even the smallest morsel of victory from such an overwhelming host of foes. And then his rage begins to quicken again, and he takes his weapon in his hand once more and engages lustily on a new campaign of slaughter.

Pardon the extravagance of this picture. But I always do seem to see Dickens as a man fighting against fearful odds—and, let me say, very often with ill-assorted arms and an inadequate equipment; blinded by his own sweat, but resolute to the last to do all the damage he can, strong in the conviction that the cruel dead weight of opposition against which he fights—this vast inert body of sluggish, pampered flesh that rots upon the earth—can only be reduced by a long course of copious blood-letting, and that every pin-prick must help as well as every sword-thrust driven home to the hilt.

Dickens had not that temperament which seeks the privacy of a laboratory, and in that atmosphere of ordered scientific calm invents engines of a subtle destructiveness; mechanical devilries flashing mysterious and sudden death upon huge crawling masses of corruption and putrefaction, licking up the unclean mess in a fiery heat-ray, and leaving the calcined remains to mingle with and enrich the fruitful dust. He was an enthusiast, something of a zealot, who might believe in, but could not subscribe to, any nicely calculated schemes born of elaborate and cautious deliberation. He had not sufficient patience for that. His cardinal fault was a certain impulsive rashness. Moreover, he

was, above all things, a man of action—restless, tireless, energetic, eager; a man whose greatest disability was that he lived at a time when Socialism had hardly begun to engage the intellect as well as the hearts of the best men; when the only gallant souls who knew of the existence of this new science of government, and realized the potency of the forces that it must engender as soon as it began to operate, were a handful of obscure and discredited reformers who had to huddle round the lamp they tended to keep it burning in the cold draughts of neglect that blew upon it, even though, by so doing, their bodies hid its radiance from the mass of humankind, only permitting here and there a feeble, fitful flicker of light to strike upward into the darkness.

CHAPTER II

POLITICS AND THE PUBLIC SERVICE

I

DICKENS was always strongly attracted to the study of politics. I have indicated in my first chapter how his youthful experiences as a shorthand reporter at political meetings all over the country and in the Gallery of the House of Commons helped him to gain an inside knowledge of the working of the political machinery; and how it was to these experiences that he owed his freedom from any illusions as to the ultimate possibilities of legislative action, as legislation was and is still carried on under the ridiculous party system; and also his robust contempt for the wire-pulling methods, the chicanery and double-dealing, and so on, that degrades the whole system of Parliamentary representation. It is further written of him that: "Party divisions he cared less and less for as life moved on; but the decisive, peremptory, dogmatic style into which a habit of rapid remark on the current topics of the day will betray the most candid and considerate commentator, displayed its influence, perhaps not always consciously to himself, in the underlying tone of bitterness that runs through the books which followed *Copperfield*."

Thus Forster. But it is conceivable that as he advanced in years and experience he grew more and more wearily dissatisfied with the whole farce, and more and more hopeless of its accomplishing any lasting drastic reforms.

"The resentment against remediable wrongs is as praiseworthy in these books," Forster proceeds, "as in the earlier tales; but the exposure of Chancery abuses, administrative incompetence, politico-economic shortcomings, and social flunkeyism, in *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, *Hard Times*, and *Our Mutual Friend*, would not have been made less odious by the cheerier tone that had struck with much sharper effect at prison abuses, parish wrongs, Yorkshire schools, and hypocritical humbug in *Pickwick*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nickleby* and *Chuzzlewit*. It will be remembered of him always that he desired to set right what was wrong, that he held no abuse to be unimprovable, that he left none of the evils named exactly as he found them, and that to influences drawn from his writings were due not a few of the salutary changes which marked the age in which he lived; but anger does not improve satire, and it gave . . . too aggressive a form to what, after all, was a very wholesome hatred of the cant that everything English is perfect, and that to call a thing un-English is to doom it to abhorred extinction."

I have already agreed to deprecate the occasional heat which Dickens displayed in his various crusades against wrong and injustice; but upon my word I am inclined to say, after reflection, that his anger was more creditable to him than any more restrained tepid advocacy. And, furthermore, may it not be hinted that in England you must show yourself to be desperately in earnest, to be in earnest to an extent which impels you to throw decorum and dignity and good taste overboard—along with your sense of humour—if you would not only command but hold public attention? The reformer who strives to laugh down abuses is usually reckoned a buffoon and so regarded. But the man who shouts and makes himself a deafening nuisance must be taken seriously into consideration, if it is only by the policeman; and we know how often the way from the

dock to the cell is paved with stones that cry out to high Heaven. It is possible, then, that Dickens grew a little tired of hearing himself constantly referred to as that droll wag, and in his clamant eagerness to see some results from his labours before he died took the shortest cut to his goal.

He once had an idea of publishing occasional papers in *Household Words* under some such general heading as The Member for Nowhere. They were to contain an account of this imaginary member's views, votes, and speeches; and Dickens contemplated starting off with his speeches on the Sunday question. "He is a member of the Government, of course" (wrote Dickens). "The moment they found such a member in the House they felt that he must be dragged (by force, if necessary) into the Cabinet." But he abandoned the idea . . . "reluctantly . . . and with it my hope to have made every man in England feel something of the contempt for the House of Commons that I have. We shall never begin to do anything until the sentiment is universal."

That was written in August, 1854; and the breakdown in the Crimea that winter had much embittered what he was pleased to call his Radicalism, in default of a better name.

"I am hourly strengthened in my own belief," said he, "that our political aristocracy and our tuft-hunting are the death of England. In all this business I don't see a gleam of hope." A most pernicious Little Englander was Dickens! . . . "As to the popular spirit, it has come to be so entirely separated from the Parliament and Government, and so perfectly apathetic about them both, that I seriously think it is a most portentous sign."

It was, indeed; a sign of the coming of a new force into the national life that should quicken the whole world. And how eagerly Dickens tried to read the meaning of that dim portentous sign, fifty years ago.

A couple of months later, in April, 1855: "I have

rather a bright idea, I think, for *Household Words* this morning: a fine little bit of satire: an account of an Arabic MS. lately discovered, very like the *Arabian Nights*—called the Thousand and One Humbugs. With new versions of the best-known stories." This also had to be given up; and is only mentioned as another illustration of his political discontents and of their connection with his journalistic work; from which, indeed, he could never keep them distinct, they were both so interwoven with the texture of all his thoughts. The influences of his early life which unconsciously strengthened his opinions in certain social directions have already been set forth in detail; and so, of his absolute sincerity in these matters, there could never be the least doubt. Whatever mistakes Dickens made, they never reflected a shadow on his integrity. What he was ever ready to declare—perhaps with too acrid an emphasis at times—that he believed in and held to with all his heart, always.

"A country," said he, writing of the Crimea inquiry, "which is discovered to be in this tremendous condition as to its war affairs, with an enormous black cloud of poverty in every town which is spreading and deepening every hour, and not one man in two thousand knowing anything about, or even believing in, its existence, with a non-working aristocracy and a silent Parliament, and everybody for himself and nobody for the rest; this is the prospect, and I think it a very deplorable one." And most admirably did he say further of that notorious inquiry, whose notoriety has only been exceeded by our rather recent South African disclosures: "O what a fine aspect of political economy it is, that the noble professors of the science on the adulteration committee should have tried to make Adulteration a question of Supply and Demand! We shall never get to the Millennium, sir, by the rounds of that ladder; and I, for one, won't hold by the skirts of that Great Mogul of

Impostors . . . !" Again he wrote, six months afterwards: "I really am serious in thinking—and I have given as painful consideration to the subject as a man with children to live and suffer after him can honestly give to it—that representative government is become altogether a failure with us, that the English gentilities and subserviencies render the people unfit for it, and that the whole thing has broken down since that great seventeenth-century time, and has no hope in it."

He had the good sense never to think seriously of Parliament as a further sphere of activity for himself. He felt that he alone could not mend matters; and he had but scanty knowledge and no understanding of the men, his contemporaries, who would have been willing to support him in that tremendous effort, had he been inclined to make it; he felt too that by offering himself as a candidate he would be putting himself in a false position. And there was still another consideration which deterred him, to be mentioned presently. It was not for lack of opportunities, however, that he declined this honour. The people of the town of Reading and others applied to him again and again during the first half of his life, and in the last half a round half-dozen of the metropolitan constituencies were after him. To one of the latter he replied: "I declare that as to all matters on the face of this teeming earth, it appears to me that the House of Commons and Parliament altogether is become just the dreariest failure and nuisance that ever bothered this much-bothered world." To a private inquiry of apparently about the same date he replied: "I have thoroughly satisfied myself, having often had occasion to consider the question, that I can be far more usefully and independently employed in my chosen sphere of action than I could hope to be in the House of Commons; and I believe that no consideration would induce me to become a member of that extraordinary assembly." But methinks a Socialist

Party might have overridden his objections. Finally, upon a reported discussion in Finsbury as to whether or not he should be invited to sit for that borough he promptly wrote, in November, 1861: "It may save some trouble if you will kindly confirm a sensible gentleman who doubted at that meeting whether I was quite the right man for Finsbury. I am not at all the sort of man; for I believe nothing would induce me to offer myself as a parliamentary representative of that place, or of any other under the sun."

The only direct attempt he made to join a political agitation was his speech at Drury Lane for administrative reform, and he never repeated it. But every movement for practical social reforms, to obtain more efficient sanitary legislation, to get the best compulsory education practicable for the poor, and for bettering the condition of the labouring people, he assisted earnestly and vigorously to his last hour. The readiness with which he took the chair at all meetings having such objects in view, the help he gave to important societies working in beneficent ways for themselves or the community, and the power and attractiveness of his oratory, made him one of the most outstanding and forceful of public personalities. It is said that his speeches derived singular charm from the buoyancy of his perfect self-possession and naturalness of bearing; and to this he added the advantages of a face and manner which had become as familiar and as popular as his books.

But his real objection to entering public life in any official capacity is best expressed in a letter to Lord Houghton in which he said that when he took literature for his profession he intended it to be his sole profession; that at that time it did not appear to him to be so well understood in England as in some other countries, that literature was a dignified calling by which any man might stand or fall; and that he, at least, was resolved

that in his own person it should stand "by itself, of itself, and for itself."

Throughout his life Dickens styled himself a Radical. "I become more of a Radical every day," he wrote and said, over and over again. But the word had a very different meaning in those days; and I think that that meaning is excellently well defined in the following description, taken from Chambers's Encyclopædia: "Radical, in English politics, is often used to denote the advanced wing of the great Liberal party. The name came into use in the regin of George III in the phrase 'radical reform.' But modern Radicals are descendants of the French Revolutionists of 1789 and began to be called Radicals about 1816. Their principal objects have been chiefly concerned with parliamentary reform, the extension of the franchise, the enlargement of the public privileges of the people, and with endeavouring to weaken and curtail the exclusive privileges and prerogatives of the oligarchical ruling classes. The Radicals of England were the pioneers of the democratic movement, and sought to achieve their ideals almost exclusively through the agency of parliamentary government." Tom Paine and Cobbett called themselves Radicals, as did all the Chartists. There was, so far as they knew, no other name sufficiently strong for their advanced opinions. In that sense Dickens was also a Radical; but not more so than many modern Socialists of a certain type are, even yet.

His instincts, at any rate, were dead right for Socialism. All that he lacked was a co-ordinated Ideal—if one may so express it: a definite scheme into which he might fit all his notions of what constituted a perfectly just, and more than merely just, a humane government—though government, again, is hardly the right word in this connection: it was the co-operative principle that he failed to lay hold on. He lacked, in fine, a large and ample conception of life, the commun-

istic conception, such as would have embraced and compassed all his altruistic aspirations and aims. What he wanted one might liken to a sort of capacious bag into which he might pack every good thing that he happened to pick up on his way through life, and which would have enabled him to carry all his precious load about with him, everywhere he went, easily, compactly, handily. And the name of that capacious bag which he had not got but which would have been so serviceable to him, which many of us find indispensable, and for the lack of which Dickens was always groping on the floor for dropped articles of faith—was, is: Socialism.

The fault of his political philosophy was the very common one. It rested on no definite moral or material basis. It was a heap of odds and ends, without form or comeliness, though much of it was of a beautiful and rare texture; it was a thing without shape or cohesion of parts: a nebulous, amorphous thing that eluded the clutch, and would not adapt itself or be confined within the dimensions of any theory, however elastic. In short, Dickens wanted the clue that only Socialism can put into the hand of the would-be social reformer, whereby he may find his way out of the maze of difficulties that his inquiries and explorations and desperate attempts to solve the problem of a better organization of the means of happiness have landed him in.

In effect, Dickens was in the position of numberless thousands of other earnest and well-meaning men today. He was a Socialist without knowing it.

II

But pending that enlightenment which never quite came, he devoted his energies to all manner of ameliorative work. He was all for palliatives, as a rule, un-

fortunately, though perhaps largely of necessity, too. He relied very largely on the visionary and fleeting results of private benevolence and charitable enterprise. He avowed that he thought the noblest sentence in the English language was: "This institution is supported entirely by voluntary contributions." It will be suggested, later on, how he came to adopt this singularly narrow and circumscribed view of the State's responsibilities; how it came about that he was so often blind to the ultimate causes of the misery and suffering and want whose existence moved him so. For the present let us inquire into what he did and what he tried to do, of his own initiative, to remedy as far as lay in his power the evils that surrounded him.

He fought a great fight for International Copyright during his first visit to America. He went there with no express intention of starting this question in any way; and certainly with no belief that such remark upon it as a person in his position could alone be expected to make would be resented strongly by any sections of the American people. But he was not long left in doubt on this head. He spoke upon the subject twice, publicly—"to the great indignation of some of the editors here" (he wrote) "who are attacking me for so doing, right and left." And he adds:—

"I believe there is no country on the face of the earth where there is less freedom of opinion on any subject in reference to which there is any broad difference of opinion than in this. . . . I write the words with reluctance, disappointment, and sorrow; but I believe it from the bottom of my soul. I spoke . . . of international copyright at Boston; and I spoke of it again at Hartford. My friends were paralysed with wonder at such audacious daring. The notion that I, a man alone by himself in America, should venture to suggest to the Americans that there was one point on which they were neither just to their own countrymen nor to

us actually struck the boldest dumb! . . . Every man who writes in this country is devoted to this question, and not one of them dares to raise his voice and complain of the atrocious state of the law. It is nothing that of all men living I am the greatest loser by it. It is nothing that I have a claim to speak and be heard. The wonder is that a breathing man can be found with temerity enough to suggest to the Americans the possibility of their having done wrong. I wish you could have seen the faces that I saw, down both sides of the table at Hartford, when I began to talk about Scott. I wish you could have heard how I gave it out. My blood so boiled as I thought of the monstrous injustice that I felt as if I were twelve feet high when I thrust it down their throats."

How his efforts were admired in England is shown in the following letter from Carlyle, written in 1842, when he and Dickens were both young men.

"We learn from the newspapers that you everywhere in America stir up the question of international copyright, and thereby awaken huge dissonance where all else were triumphant unison for you. I am asked my opinion on the matter, and requested to write it down in words.

"Several years ago, if memory err not, I was one of many English writers who, under the auspices of Miss Martineau, did already sign a petition to Congress, praying for international copyright between the two Nations—which properly are not two nations, but one; indivisible by Parliament, Congress, or any kind of human law or diplomacy, being already united by Heaven's Act of Parliament, and the everlasting law of Nature and Fact. To that opinion I still adhere, and am likely to continue adhering. . . ."

It may be argued, however, that the part Dickens took in this International Copyright agitation was not so much an evidence of his public spirit, since it may

have had as its main objective, the betterment of his own fortunes. But this can hardly have been his motive when in 1850 he tried to evolve a scheme for the advantage of men of letters, in conjunction with Lord Lytton. The idea was to raise a fund by means of a series of private theatricals to be given in the hall of Lord Lytton's ancestral seat at Knebworth Park.

Recent experience of such "splendid strolling" had shown what the public interest in this kind of amusement might place within reach of its providers; and there came to be discussed the possibility of making permanent such help as had been afforded to fellow-writers, by means of an endowment that should not be mere charity, but should combine something of both pension-list and college lectureship, without the drawbacks of either. Dickens held that it was not enough considered that schemes of self-help, to be successful, require from those they are meant to benefit, not only a general assent to their advisability, but zealous co-operation. This rather ill-advised enterprise was duly set in train, aided by the Duke of Devonshire and others, and duly failed, as might have been expected by any promoters less sanguine. But it gave occasion for Dickens to make the following speech, and in that circumstance it had its value. Said Dickens, proposing the health of Lytton, the chairman :—

"There is a popular prejudice, a kind of superstition, that authors are not a particularly united body, and I am afraid that this may contain half a grain or so of the veracious. . . . That we men of letters are, or have been, invariably or inseparably attached to each other, it may not be possible to say, formerly or now; but there cannot now be, and there cannot ever have been, among the followers of literature, a man so entirely without the grudging little jealousies that too often overshadow its brightness. . . . Nor was there ever a time when such reason existed for bearing testimony

to his great consideration for the evils sometimes unfortunately attendant upon literature. . . . For, in conjunction with some other gentlemen now present, I have just embarked on a design with him to smooth the rugged way of young labourers both in literature and the fine arts, and to soften, but by no eleemosynary means, the declining years of meritorious age. If it prosper, as I hope it will, and as I know it ought, there will one day in England be an honour where there is now a reproach; and a future race of men of letters will gratefully remember that it originated in the sympathies and was made practicable by the generosity of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton."

But really, of course, the greater credit belonged to Dickens himself.

However that may be, there can be no doubt of his entire disinterestedness in endless other directions: as, for example, in his advocacy of the cause of popular education.

On October 2, 1843, he presided at the opening of the Manchester Athenæum, when Disraeli and Cobden also assisted, and spoke of the education of the poor to this fine effect: He protested against the danger of calling a little learning dangerous; declared his preference for the very least of the little over none at all; proposed to substitute for the old a new doggerel,

> Learning can give what they can not,
> Though house and lands be never got;

told his listeners of the real and paramount danger that he had lately taken Longfellow to see in the night-refuges of London, "thousands of immortal creatures condemned without alternative or choice to tread, not what our great poet calls the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire, but one of jagged flints and stones laid down by brutal ignorance"; and he contrasted this with the unspeakable consolation and blessings that a

little knowledge had shed on men of the lowest estate and most hopeless means, "watching the stars with Ferguson, the shepherd's boy; walking the streets with Crabbe, a poor barber here in Lancashire; with Arkwright, a tallow-chandler's son; with Franklin; shoemaking with Bloomfield in his garret; following the plough with Burns; and high above the noise of loom and hammer, whispering courage in the ears of workers I could this day name in Sheffield and in Manchester."

The same spirit impelled him to give eager welcome to the newly-instituted ragged schools. In regard to these he writes: "I sent Miss Coutts a sledge-hammer account of the ragged schools; and as I saw her name for two hundred pounds in the clergy education subscription list, took pains to show her that religious mysteries and difficult creeds wouldn't do for such pupils. I told her too that it was of immense importance that they should be *washed*. She writes back to know what the rent of some large airy premises would be, and what the expense of erecting a regular bathing or purifying place; touching which points I am in correspondence with the authorities." Again, in offering to describe these ragged schools for the *Edinburgh Review*, he told Napier, the editor, that he would do this in a paper on education, if the *Review* were not afraid to take ground against the Church catechism and other mere formularies and subtleties, in reference to the education of the young and ignorant. But the *Review* was dreadfully afraid, and so the article never appeared.

He was equally disinterested in his efforts on behalf of temperance; and indeed did seem to have a pretty acute perception, here at least, of the root causes of the evil of drunkenness. Forster explicitly states that:—

"There was no subject on which through his whole life he felt more strongly than this. No man advocated temperance, even as far as possible legislative enforce-

ment, with greater earnestness ; but he made important reservations. Not thinking drunkenness to be a vice inborn, or incident to the poor more than to other people, he never would agree that the existence of a gin-shop was the alpha and omega of it. Believing it to be the ' national horror,' he also believed that many operative causes had to do with having made it so ; and his objection to the temperance agitation was that these were left out of account altogether. He thought the gin-shop not fairly to be rendered the exclusive object of attack until, in connection with the classes who made it their resort, the temptations that led to it, physical and moral, should have been more bravely dealt with. Among the former he counted foul smells, disgusting habitations, bad workshops and workshop customs, scarcity of light, air, and water, in short the absence of all easy means of decency and health ; and among the latter the mental weariness and languor so induced, the desire of wholesome relaxation, the craving for some stimulus and excitement, not less needful than the sun itself to lives so passed ; and last, and inclusive of all the rest, ignorance, and the want of rational mental training generally applied. This was consistently Dickens's ' platform ' throughout the years he was known to me ; and holding it to be within the reach as well as the scope of legislation, which even our political magnates have been discovering lately, he thought intemperance to be but the one result that, out of all those arising from the absence of legislation, was the most wretched. For him, drunkenness had a teeming and reproachful history anterior to the drunken stage ; and he thought it the first duty of the moralist bent upon annihilating the gin-shop to ' strike deep and spare not ' at those previous remediable evils."

But a bald list of his works of pure supererogation might be prolonged almost indefinitely. Apart from the good he did in his public writings the good he did

by his private endeavours is incalculable. He was always tilting at some abuse ; at the scandal of public executions, the maladministration of charitable funds, the mismanagement of workhouses and prisons, transgressions of the elementary laws of sanitation, the horrors of labour-servitude and black slavery : wherever there seemed an outlet for his altruistic zeal there he was always ready to pour out his strength in the public service, without stint, without any self-seeking, wholeheartedly and devotedly.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

I

IN the course of a letter on Forster's *Life*, addressed to the author himself, Carlyle said: "So long as Dickens is interesting to his fellow-men, here will be seen, face to face, what Dickens's manner of existing was. His bright and joyful sympathy with everything around him; his steady practicality withal; the singularly solid business talent he continually had; and deeper than all, if one has the eye to see deep enough, dark, fateful, silent elements, tragical to look upon, and hiding amid dazzling radiances as of the sun, the elements of death itself."

It was, of course, Carlyle's way always to employ two words where one would suffice, and to add a dash of fizzy rhetoric to any mixture he compounded—and he has many disciples. Thus it is only in the nature of things that he should, twice over and very especially, emphasize what he describes as the business, practical side of Dickens's character.

And it is plain that Dickens impressed most of his contemporaries, and all those who had familiar dealings with him, in precisely that same way. And no doubt it was just this effect that Dickens commonly aimed at in his ordinary conduct. He prided himself on his strength of mind. (One espies a little innocent vanity here.) He did his utmost to be very straight and direct in all his daily commerce with the world; to eschew

all appearance of humbug and sham and pretence; to say outright what he had to say, and to say it as colloquially and in as expected a fashion as might be —since he had no least delight in perversity or paradox for its own sake; not to affect a delicacy that he did not feel or to profess scruples that were not spontaneous in him; not to burke any out-cropping issues; not to blink facts or to misrepresent or distort the truth in order to spare any mawkish susceptibilities that he had no inherent respect for. Dickens's pose, in short, if he had one, was to have no pose. It does not appear at all distinctly in any records bearing upon him, but I am inclined to assume, notwithstanding, that he had little patience with what he would have designated as fads and faddists, or with the lucubrations of apparently idle theorists and idealists who had no very definite and obvious intention of putting their theories and ideals to the test of actual experiment. He would, I feel pretty sure, have been proud to describe himself as a Plain Man, an Average Man, One of the Crowd. He had no rooted objections to any conventions merely because they were conventions; and he might have told you that he would rather have been on the losing side of the Philistines than have won any victory of the Chosen People by the aid of big trumpets. He had a positive love and veneration for some old and hoary institutions, so long as they seemed to him to be harmless—and picturesque. New drastic methods had very little real attraction for him, He preferred rather to alter and adapt, to botch and patch and tinker at old systems, and to cover up their unsightly blemishes and flaws and weak spots with plenty of bright fresh paint, than to invent new systems altogether. Hence his fondness for palliatives, such as private charity and individualistic benevolence provided.

And in matters of crude business, at driving a bargain or clinching a deal; in affairs of every day; in the

organization and arrangement of commonplace concerns ; he showed an undoubted shrewdness and stability of judgment, a firmness of grasp and a dexterity of manipulation, that would very likely have carried him to great wealth and power in the City. He did not keep his sentimentality in his pocket with his money or allow it to confuse his arithmetic. He was uncommonly well able to look after his own material interests ; and having a very just estimate of his financial value, was keen on getting the top price for such wares as he had to sell. Very early in life he had learnt to appreciate the uses of money, and it was a lesson that he never forgot or failed to profit by.

To quote again from that old juvenile production of mine : " He had too close a knowledge of the actualities of our daily existence—and by this I mean those elementary things like hunger and thirst and hard work, and the weariness that comes after hard work : things like uncomfortable beds and uncomfortable boots : things like the wish to buy a toy for a baby brother or sister and the empty pocket that makes it impossible—to minimize their importance. . . . He knew how the influences of a rough time shape you. If you are a man, they do you good—permanent good ; they mould your mind and enlarge it ; they teach you divine compassion ; enable you to understand many things that no book contains ; make and keep you wise. They teach you also to be philosophic, to see things in their right proportions, not to be cut up over trifles or to be careless of big dangers, but always ready to face the fun and the fury of the day. . . . It was because Dickens had suffered and come through that he made his way so directly into the hearts of the people. He could laugh and cry off a full heart, and so he could make other people laugh and cry. . . . Only those who know the sordid can appreciate the sublime. And you can't get to know the sordid by making notes about

it. You must bathe in the waters yourself and get the taste of their bitterness into your mouth. But not into your heart. . . . Dickens saw life with the eyes of the people he wrote about. . . . There is consequently more laughter than tears in his books, just as there is more laughter than tears in real life anywhere. For after all a good deal of crying is done more because it is expected of us than because we want to cry. But nobody is shocked if we don't laugh, though some are grieved. . . . A joke was not poor in Dickens's eyes because a poor man made it; and the haggard happiness of the ignorant was not more contemptible to him than the sleek self-indulgence of the well-to-do class. He knew that it is possible to get as much enjoyment out of pease-pudding and a faggot as it is to get enjoyment out of the diseased liver of a goose or maggoty birds'-flesh." And so on.

I transcribe these utterances exactly as they were delivered, without any sort of embellishment, because they do seem to say in their brusque, unstudied way what I am now trying to express in more sober and sedate wise—and am really failing to say with any force, merely because I am so constituted that it is unspeakably difficult for me to repeat myself on purpose. The gist of all this is, then, that Dickens, superficially considered, justified all that Carlyle had to say about him in regard to his practicality and level-headedness.

But it is to be borne in mind that Dickens was at heart a man of sentiment; and that there is no man like your sentimentalist for aping worldly wisdom. The man who is most aware of his possession of a soft heart is usually most anxious to present the hardest exterior to the world. The man who most deeply mistrusts his own quixotry is ever the first to expound a callous cynicism. I have said elsewhere that a wise man is often foolish, but a fool is always wise, because he dare

not be otherwise; and I venture to recommend the saying to you, in this place, not for its literal but for its occult significance.

There was a good deal of the grown-up child about Dickens, as there often is about great and good men. And we know what a very stern and adamantine front a child preserves in the face of any serious business that it happens to be engaged in. So, I suspect, it was with him. He dared not (in the phrase) let himself go. But how he must have laughed until he cried in the seclusion of his study! And we know that he did. Dickens, like all who belong to the breed of Peter Pan, was a born actor—an actor, that is, in the broad theatrical sense. And how glad and eager he was always to turn from the play-acting that deceived others—but never himself—to the play-acting that deceived only himself, and never anybody else. His public life was a long unending game of make-believe, in which he played his part consummately, only vouchsafing glimpses of the real Charles Dickens who dwelt in that grimacing and gesticulating outer semblance to such keen observers as Carlyle and—who knows?—to his wife, maybe.

But lest this should seem a too grotesquely far-fetched and fantastic theory to account for so thin and slight a mystery, let us consider what other influences tended to form Dickens's character.

We know how he suffered in his childhood and how the scars of his suffering never completely healed. But against that bitter experience is to be set all the long unclouded years of his prosperity and fame. From the moment that he published *Sketches by Boz*—nay, almost from the moment when he left the solicitor's office as a boy of sixteen or seventeen—he never again knew what it was to want the common necessaries of existence. More important still to one of his temperament, he never knew what it was to lack some sort of excitement

and variety in his life. He moved from scene to scene, from phase to phase of his calling, from social grade to social grade, and always successfully, always happily and propitiously, winning fresh glory in every new field of enterprise and adventure that he explored, making new friends at every turn, ever adding new material to the joyous busy fullness of his life, ever attaining to a more ample and generous satisfaction of his dearest desires and hopes and ambitions and proclivities. Out of the ruin even of his few disappointments and set-backs sprang some of his greatest triumphs, as we have seen that the series of Christmas books sprang out of the initial failure (afterwards handsomely retrieved) of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The only sorrows and pains and deprivations that he had to bear were such as are inseparable from the fleshly nature of mankind, and from the incidental weaknesses of all such temperaments as his. And even here he was exceptionally fortunate, dying in the plenitude of his powers and the heyday of his reputation, instead of lagging superfluous on the stage from which all his contemporaries had already made their final exit.

II

But the chief controlling influence which moulded Dickens was, I think, one that is common to all men who win to a great success very early in life. It is at once a blessed and a baneful influence. And it manifests itself in the existence of a false atmosphere.

The young genius, acclaimed and crowned before the down on his chin has had time to change into bristles, is taken at a disadvantage by Fate. He is thrust, as it would seem, prematurely, into a position of responsibility that he is hardly equal to supporting. He is elevated to a height that is apt to turn his head giddy. He finds a difficulty in breathing that rarefied air at

first; though I am bound to say he usually gets over this soon enough. Now it is not advanced that Dickens suffered any irreparable mischief by his immediate unbounded success; indeed, it is advanced that he gained more than he lost by it. And one of his clearest gains was that he retained the youthful buoyancy and brightness of his genius, intact and unsullied, for an unparalleled length of time. If he had had to wait for a tardy fame and recognition it is hardly conceivable that his books would have been the joyous contribution to the gaiety of the world that they are; or that he would have shed such a golden glow over his age as he did. After many years of heartsickness, born of hope deferred, he would probably have presented himself to the public at last as a very different Dickens from the glad spirit we know. It is possible that his work might have attained to a greater grandeur of conception and a finer perfection of execution; that his philosophy might have taken on a more profound as well as a more sombre cast; and that his name would have stamped itself upon the history of the world as that of a colossal new force in literature fit to stand beside that of Æschylus. But personally—to put away affectation and to voice the honest opinion of the vast majority—I feel that I could more equably resign myself to the loss of twenty Greek dramatists than one Dickens. Nevertheless, Dickens's early success did no doubt tend to stultify and warp him in various directions. And these processes were greatly helped by that false atmosphere to which I have before alluded, in which, indeed, they were mainly generated.

It is the same atmosphere, with a difference that needs no explanation, which has surrounded and enveloped all men upon whom the mantle of greatness has fallen in their youth. It is an atmosphere created by a circle of admirers and dependents, friends and relatives, hangers-on and parasites. Everybody who

comes within the radius of such an atmosphere must contribute to it, directly or indirectly: parents, wife, children, brothers and sisters, cousins and uncles and aunts to the last remove, and all other connections of whatsoever sort; literary advisers and critics and co-adjutors; paid and voluntary assistants; those who hope to profit solidly by some exploitation of the genius, and those who only ask to be allowed to bask in the reflected lustre of the presence: all are in a tacit conspiracy to muffle and obscure the senses of the object of their service and devotion in a mist of adulation and subservience, deference and respect, thickened by the incense of praise and rose-tinted with partisanship. It is impossible for any human creature so enclosed about by an unbroken circle of altar-flames to see quite clearly what is going on in the workaday world without. It is impossible for them to hear distinctly what the voices of that world are saying. The verdict of the crowd is intercepted and softened before it reaches their august ears. The cold waters of ridicule and opposition that are poured upon their efforts are dammed up and stayed. The icy blast of destructive criticism is tempered to these petted lambs. It is not necessary, nor would it be seemly, to push this comparison to its furthest limits; but all who have known any of the Acknowledged Great in their homes, enbosomed in the family circle, will recognize the essential truth of this picture.

Dickens was a man who insisted on seeing things for himself, on making his investigations personally, and on getting absolutely first-hand information on any subject with which he wished to deal; but there is little doubt that he deceived himself in thinking that he could acquire any fresh and authentic experience in this way. What he actually did was to revive his old memories of cognate experiences as they had befallen himself and to rekindle them at this more

recent light—and we know how memory colours facts; or, to strain his old experiences in such a way as to make them cover these new ones. His knowledge of the very poor—often miraculously acute—was mainly born of his sympathy and intuition, and not, as many assume, of his actual experience at all. The kind of poverty that he had suffered under in his own person was not of the kind that he especially and deliberately went out of his way to champion the cause of, in his novels; but of that other shabby-genteel kind which he treated so lightly and humorously in his depictions of lower middle-class life. The volume of Dickens's harsh experiences, in short, may be said virtually to have closed when he opened *Pickwick:* all that he added to it was a slim appendix containing some corrected impressions and some not over-well-substantiated additional facts and figures. And it was inevitable that this should be so. Dickens lived in his work. Everything that he did was subordinated to it. He had no separate existence apart from its interests. All was grist that came to his mill, to be immediately ground into, and mixed up with, the leaven of his genius.

Consider, then, the position that he held in his little world. Courted, flattered, caressed, deferred to; the idol of the populace; the chosen familiar of the greatest in the land; rich and famous and illustrious; beloved and respected: how was it possible that he should be amenable to the thousand and one current influences that sway and determine the characters and the courses of lesser men?

It is said, and I can believe it true, that in Mr. Podsnap he painted his own portrait, unwittingly.

He did not want to hear about any new-fangled notions for reorganizing society on a new and better basis. He didn't believe in this—what is it, again?—Social—h'm!—Socialism—that was advocated by a little group of cranks and faddists, mere visionaries at

best, probably men of a gloomy and a dreary cast of mind, who were no doubt discontented failures. Who, at any rate, had never studied the problems of the day as he flattered himself he had studied them. What did they know of the poor? What did they know of practical legislation? Come, now! O, yes; Ruskin was a dear fellow, a clever chap, but—between ourselves—quite a hopeless and impossible person. Lived an etherealized life, so to speak. . . . O, quite in the air, you know! Yes, yes. Of course, he agreed that the present system of government was utterly rotten. It was a damnable system! But these young bloods (I can imagine Dickens saying) are not going to accomplish at one swoop what I have failed to find even any plausible remedy for, after all the efforts of a lifetime. It isn't likely. . . . Followed, the combination of flushed face and that peculiar flourish of the right arm which put these difficulties behind him and so swept them, not out of existence, but certainly out of sight.

But it would be ungracious, as it is fortunately unnecessary, to pursue all the various and eccentric ramifications of this theory to their logical conclusions. It is sufficient to indicate that there must have been some bias, some kink, in Dickens's mental apparatus, to send him so woefully astray when he seemed to be so well within sight of the destination he was heading for with all his might. In the very forefront of this present enterprise it is pointed out that the word Socialism was not invented until 1835—the year before that in which Dickens published his first book at the age of twenty-four. And how that it was not until thirteen years after his death that Socialism could truly be said to have begun to lay a really firm hold on the mind and heart of the English people. It was in 1883, during the great trial of anarchists at Lyons, that Socialism, after having practically died out for a generation, suddenly leaped into prominence again, and its

principles and its methods began to be properly understood. For some years after that date it attracted great attention, and gained an enormous number of able and active adherents, only to enter again upon that second quiescent stage which terminated in the last five or six years.

It is therefore extremely likely that Dickens never heard of Socialism in his life; or, if he did hear of it, that he lumped it with all the other Isms whose only effect upon him, as a rule, was merely to irritate his sensorium and move him to splenetic expressions of contempt for all such crack-brained, wire-drawn impracticalities, spun out of moonshine and set in a fairy ring to dance out their brief, delirious span, and then to vanish away with the night mists out of which they were created, at the first fierce thrust of the light of day.

Of that scientific Socialism which means the extension to industry and economics of the free self-governing principle recognized in democracy; and which would have the industry of the people controlled by the people, for the people; of that he had no sort of least conception.

If he had. . . .!

Still I hold to it that had Dickens lived to-day he would have been a Socialist. I repeat that he was a Socialist without knowing it—as so many are; as all men, sound in heart and head, must be.

I have tried to prove that he worked for Socialism, not the less strenuously and effectively because unconsciously. In this over-long, yet too short and disjected review of his life and work I have tried to show how he laboured in the Cause, and I have set out my shop-front with a few choice samples of the fruit of that labour. Even so, I have left entirely out of account very much that I should have liked to include: his miscellanies and collections of essays, his uncompleted

novel, *Edwin Drood*, and his volume of speeches, his *Child's History of England*, and his plays; and a host of other scattered fragments, that might with perfect propriety have found a place herein; but to which I am disposed rather to send the reader to make his own investigations and form his own conclusions.

The gasman employed to superintend the lighting arrangements at the various halls where his public readings were given, pronounced Dickens's best epitaph, perhaps, when he said: "The more you want of the Master, the more you'll find in him."

THE END

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